ETHICS, SUBJECTIVE AND SECULAR

By

Steve F. Sapontzis

In this paper I want to discuss what does and does not follow, in the way of justification in ethics, from the following two propositions:

The existence of values depends on the existence of valuers.

There is no valuer who values things for all times and places.

Let us call the first of these propositions the "subjective proposition" or "SuP" and the second the "secular proposition" or "SeP."

We shall begin by offering a few words of explication about "valuer" in these propositions. First, the term is not being used here to refer exclusively to those who specifically, reflectively evaluate things, more or less saying (or even just being able to say) things like "She has a gorgeous home" and "He's an honest man." In addition to such explicit, reflective valuers, "valuer" will here cover those who merely (can) experience things as having value. For example, various nonhuman animals doubtless experience dry land as having one value and sea water another, due to their physiology or conditioning, presumably without any reflection whatsoever (or perhaps even without being able to engage in evaluative reflection). Such non-reflective beings are still "valuers" as the term is being used here. Existentialists often talk about various ways of "being in the world;" what is meant here by a "valuer" is a being for which value is a dimension of the world in which he/she/it lives.
Some philosophers would restrict "value" and associated terms to intellectually accomplished beings such as language users and the reflectively self-conscious.\(^1\) However, such a restriction simply does not ring true. While it may be that we do not use the verb "to value" as commonly with nonhuman animals as with people--e.g., we commonly say things like "She values her career more than her marriage" but not "Spot values adventure over food"--we do commonly use a wide variety of evaluating terms when describing those animals, e.g., "Spot would sooner go for a run with Billy than eat" and "Spot prefers Alpo to Kal Kan." Such usages are not anthropomorphic, since there is nothing peculiarly human about liking, preferring, enjoying, etc., none of which requires the highly developed intellectual capacity which distinguishes us from other animals. Consequently, to interpret SuP as contending that the existence of values depends on the existence of beings at least as intellectually accomplished as humans typically are would be to interject an intellectual bias into the discussion. We shall reject that prejudice and interpret SuP as referring to all those who live in a world where things have value for them.

Our second bit of explication is directed at the opposite extreme; i.e., it concerns "mere" things. Presumably there are in the world things for which things are not of value, e.g., plants and inanimate objects. Valuers can be separated from these non-valuing things by noting that valuers, but not non-valuers, are beings with:

1. affective sensitivities, such as the ability to feel pleasure and pain,
2. desires and the feelings or emotions which go with their being fulfilled or frustrated, or
3. needs whose fulfillment or frustration elicits feelings or emotions similar to those in (2).

The key point under all three of these headings is that valuers are beings with feelings or emotions. While saying that plants "need" water to survive is unobjectionable, it does not seem sensible to say that plants "care about," "like," or otherwise value water. This is because the fulfillment or frustration of their need for water does not seem to inspire any feelings or emotions in them. Conversely, when we see an animal looking anxious and behaving in a
distressed manner before and looking relieved and behaving in a contented way after getting a drink, we can sensibly say that it "liked," "enjoyed," or otherwise valued its drink because it seems to have feelings or emotions about the fulfillment and frustration of its needs. Thus, although valuers need not be especially intellectual, they must have (or be capable of having) feelings or emotions.

I propose to label beings with any of these three affective capacities as beings which "have interests." Of course, in line with our first bit of explication, we must distinguish "having an interest" from "taking an interest" in something. For example, since mercury pollutants in the water will cause them to suffer, birds can be said to "have an interest" in mercury-free water, even though they presumably cannot comprehend pollution issues and, consequently, cannot be said to "take an interest" in them. The same is true of aboriginal people whose cultural background might also make it impossible for them to comprehend and take an interest in pollution issues, although they have an interest in not having their native waters poisoned. On the other hand, this is not true of vegetation that might also be harmed by mercury, since, presumably, the vegetation cannot feel ill, experience fear at dying, or the like. Thus, insofar as X does not (will not, would not) affect P's feelings or emotions, P has no interest in X, and insofar as X does (will, would) affect P's feelings or emotions, P has an interest in X whether he/she/it realizes this and takes an interest in X or not. It follows, of course, that beings with no feelings or emotions at all have no interests at all.

Understanding that valuers are beings with interests, it is not difficult to understand why the existence of values depends on the existence of valuers. Consider the difference between a sophisticated robot warehouseman and a human warehouseman. Both of them can respond in a purposive, efficient manner to an order to bring four pallets of air conditioners to Loading Dock 7. If the robot is sufficiently complex to contain a self-monitoring circuit, it may, like the human, even be able to make recommendations about how such tasks could be carried out more efficiently in the future. However, the order, the job, and the recommendation cannot have any value for the robot, or so we presume. The human, but not the robot, can find the order an annoyance at the end of
a long day or a welcome relief from boredom; he can find the job a chance to show off his skills with a forklift to the new girl in dispatch or an additional pain for already sore shoulders; and he can see his recommendation as a chance for the bonus he needs to buy the new boat he wants or for showing how inept the young college kid in charge of the warehouse is. Presumably nothing of this sort is possible for the robot, for it has no feeling or emotion about orders, jobs, or recommendations. It can be described as understanding or misunderstanding the orders it is given but not as welcoming or resenting them, as completing its task or malfunctioning but not as being careless or taking pride in its work, and as providing self-corrective review but not as caring about doing the job better.

As long as we presume that even such a sophisticated robot has no feelings or emotions, there seems to be no place for values in its world; values enter only when we bring in feeling, emotive beings that have or take an interest in what the robot is about. That is also why the existence of values depends on the existence of valuers.

Turning to our secular proposition, the point of it is to exclude God as a source of value. One way of accepting SuP and still securing for favored things a value independent of the vicissitudes of human history is to postulate a valuer outside of that history. Expressing the secular dimension of contemporary moral philosophy, SeP of course precludes such a postulate. Whether it follows, as Ivan Karamazov thought, that "all is permitted" is one of the issues we shall have to address.

II

Having explicated our two propositions, we can now turn to the issue of the sorts of justification of ethical values that are compatible with them. Specifically, do these principles preclude the rational justification of ethical values?

Let us work at answering this question by constructing a realistic case of ethical disagreement, considering what might be said by the disputants either to support their positions or to attack the other's position, and
determining which of the things that might be said are compatible with SuP and SeP. The case I have in mind is that of a disagreement between a mother and her twenty year-old daughter. Call the mother Fran and her daughter Kathy. The dispute is occasioned by Kathy's planning to move in with her boyfriend, Scott. The disagreement is over whether it would be immoral for Kathy and Scott to live together, intimately, without being married. Fran thinks it would be immoral; Kathy thinks it's okay. How might the discussion run?

Fran might begin by saying that the Bible and other teachings of the church in which she raised Kathy say that such an arrangement would be "living in sin;" Kathy would be violating God's law if she moved in with Scott. Of course, this sort of defense is incompatible with SeP. Let us presume that Kathy also rejects this defense, saying that she's not sure anymore that there really is a God, but she feels sure that if there is a deity who really loves his children and wants them to be happy, he would approve of her moving in with Scott.

Next, Fran might say things like, "This will break your father's heart!" "What will the neighbors say?" and "We'll never be able to hold our heads high again!" Unknowingly echoing Socrates in the Crito, Kathy could respond that her family and the neighbors have nothing to be ashamed of or upset about, since there is nothing wrong in her moving in with Scott. Anyone who is ashamed of her or upset about what she's doing is just following outdated prejudices. While she doesn't want to hurt her parents' feelings, she doesn't feel it's right for those feelings to stand in the way of her pursuing her life according to what she feels is right. (We might say that while Kathy values not hurting her parents' feelings, she does not recognize those feelings as authoritative for her and more highly values moving in with Scott).

Fran might then say things like, "What if this affair doesn't work out; have you thought of that? Your reputation will be ruined; no decent man will be interested in you then." Kathy might respond by saying things like, "If we never took chances because we're afraid of what will happen if we fail, we'd get nowhere" and "Again you're behind the times; 'decent' men don't
insist or even expect that the women they love will be virgins these days. Being a virgin just isn’t as important today as it used to be.”

Fran, getting exasperated, might respond, “Young people today are just animals: no self-restraint, no sense of values, no concern for anything but immediate pleasure.” Kathy would doubtless respond, “But Scott and I really love each other; we’re just not ready for marriage yet. This isn’t a one night stand; we really care about each other as persons.”

Fran could retort, “And what about children; have you thought about children?” To this Kathy would doubtless say, “We’re not planning to have children. We’ll take precautions.”

Interrupting our little drama for a moment, I think it is important to note how long it has gone on and how many different sorts of issues have been raised and relevantly responded to. Moral philosophers have traditionally tended to jump to the most general levels of ethical concern—e.g., “What would lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number?” or “What if everybody did that?”—while most actual ethical disputes are argued at a much more restricted level. Actual ethical arguments concern matters of fact and interpretation and the “thick” ethical concepts, such as chastity and animality, which Bernard Williams (among others) emphasizes in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. A great deal of give and take, raising and relevantly responding to relevant issues can be and routinely is accomplished without rising to the heights of abstraction on which moral philosophers often place great emphasis.

We can also note that except for Fran’s opening religious gambit, all of Fran’s objections to and Kathy’s defenses of couples living together out of wedlock have been compatible with SuP and SeP. Whatever problems these propositions may pose for ethical justification at the abstract level, at this concrete level of actual ethical argument, they have not posed an obstacle to rational give and take.

Getting back to our little drama, Fran might say something like, “What would the world be like if everybody ‘shacked up’ the way you and Scott are planning to? How’d you like to live in that kind of world?” Kathy would probably respond, “I’d like it fine. I think everyone should have the freedom to live with the one they love. People shouldn’t be forced into
marriage before they're ready for it, just so they can live together. I think there'd be a lot less divorce and misery in a world like that."

Fran might retort, "But how could society survive, how could we raise children properly, if everyone was moving from one love affair to another as they felt the urge? We need lasting commitments and stable families; you see the kind of juvenile delinquency problems which your casual attitude toward marriage is creating." Let's say that Kathy responds with, "I'm not sure that juvenile delinquency is really worse today than before or that you can lay all the blame for it on unmarried people living together. Still, I agree that it's better for people planning to have children to get married—but Scott and I aren't planning to have children. And as for social stability, surely the nation won't collapse just because Scott and I live together. More and more unmarried people are living together these days, and society's still here, no closer to anarchy or revolution because of this new freedom. Society may even be better off for it, because people who love each other but who don't want to or can't get married aren't frustrated the way they used to be."

Let's say that Kathy goes on to conclude with "Look, mom, I love you and don't want to hurt you, but this is really important to me. I know this is right for me, and nothing you've said has convinced me otherwise. I don't think there's any point in our talking about it anymore. I just hope that you'll wish me happiness—and continue to love me, as I continue to love you." Fran might respond, "I don't know; I just don't know what to say."

Does this sort of conclusion indicate that the discussion was a failure, that ethical disputes like this are irresolvable without some sort of religious or otherwise universal basis for ethics, and that, consequently, accepting SuP and SeP would undermine ethics? I think not. Constructive resolutions of ethical disagreements are not always something like "finding the truth;" often such resolutions are mutual respect, "agreeing to disagree," and/or a bit of "consciousness raising," coming to recognize that what one has hitherto embraced as obviously of value is not similarly valued by everyone who cares about these things and for whom one has some respect. Just as ethical disagreements are diverse, so what count as more or less constructive resolutions of ethical disagreements are diverse. It would be presumptive to claim a particular resolution for our little drama, but it is not implausible to
speculate that toward the end Fran, recognizing that Kathy still deeply cares for her and is not merely a rebellious child or "tramp," is beginning to recognize the relevance and significance of Kathy's responses to her criticisms and may start to reflect critically on her own heretofore unquestioned values in this area. That is, it is not implausible to speculate that this discussion may lead to a significant bit of consciousness raising on Fran's part, which may in turn lead her to recognize a greater diversity of ethically acceptable living arrangements than she had previously recognized.

Of course it may be responded that all this signifies is that Fran will have changed her opinion; it cannot signify, according to SuP and SeP, that Fran's expanded tolerance is "the truth" or even closer to the truth about what is right or wrong here. This is because there are no authoritative, historical standards of value to which her opinions may more or less closely conform.

This is true enough, but we should not read too much into it. First, it is important to note that if Fran does come to share Kathy's evaluation of living together out of wedlock on the basis of something like the above discussion, she will have arrived at her new opinion in a rational manner. She will not have let her emotions run rampant or otherwise irrationally swung from one evaluation to another. In the above discussion she raises issues which she feels relevant to and important for evaluating living together out of wedlock. Kathy responds to these sincerely and relevantly. The discussion is a logical bit of practical reasoning in conclusion of which Fran's moving toward Kathy's evaluation would not be arbitrary.

Furthermore, social scientists like Ruth Benedict were mistaken in believing that propositions like SuP and SeP entail a kind of universal tolerance. That is because what value one places one's values vis-à-vis others' values is something about which SuP and SeP are silent. Nevertheless, these propositions do undermine some traditional bases, especially religious ones, for intolerance. Since SuP and SeP are not evaluative principles but propositions about the origin of values, they are a kind of factual claim. It follows that if they are correct and undermine traditional bases for intolerance, they show that those traditional values were based on factual or factual-like (i.e., non-evaluative, religious or
metaphysical) beliefs which are mistaken. To that extent they indicate that increased tolerance is more correct than traditional intolerance.

Thus, while SuP and SeP may dash the hopes that some people hold for an ethics as objective and secure as arithmetic (which may be a mistake about arithmetic, too), they do not leave ethical discussion and resolution an anarchic battlefield of warring emotions bereft of reason. SuP and SeP are compatible with ethical discussion and resolution being conducted by and reached through practical reasoning, i.e., being the offering and countering of relevant concerns, information, scenarios, inferences, etc., about values and the basing and refining of one's evaluations and actions on such discussion. As in our little drama, the parameters of what is relevant and what is not, of what is permitted in resolving the disagreement and what is not, are determined by "where the people are coming from," i.e., by the beliefs and understanding of the participants concerning associated values, matters of fact, concerns, and commitments, likely consequences of actions, sources of authority, logical precedence and other priorities, apt descriptions, and so forth. Thus anchoring the discussion and its resolution in the fabric of the participants' lives also insures that the values arrived at will be taken seriously by these participants, not to be tossed away easily whenever inconvenient for them.

Thus, ethics can be pursued in a rational manner even when subjective and secular--Ivan can rest secure, all is not permitted.
1 For example, writing about the misfortune of death and the right to life, Ruth Cigman claims that:

Death is not a misfortune merely because it is a bad condition to be in, relative to being alive, healthy, and so on... For a creature to be a possible subject of the misfortune of death, life itself must be an object of value for it.


2 Crito, 46c-48a, concluding with what we ought to consider is not so much what people in general will say about us but how we stand with the expert in right and wrong, the one authority, who represents the actual truth. So in the first place your proposition is not correct when you say that we should consider popular opinion in questions of what is right and honorable and good, or the opposite (Tredennick translation).


4 The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values.... As soon as the new opinion is embraced as customary belief, it will be another trusted bulwark of the good life. We shall arrive then at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the co-existing and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.