T HIS paper will propose a subjective theory of values and discuss the consequences of it for justification in ethics. This subjective conception of values is based on the following proposition:

The existence of valuers is a necessary condition for things having value.

I call this the “subjective proposition,” or “SbP” for short. A second proposition is also definitive of the position to be developed here:

There is no omniscient valuer whose evaluations establish “the true value” of everything.

This will be called the “secular proposition,” or “ScP” for short. I am primarily interested in explicating and developing the consequences of the subjective proposition. The secular proposition has been added here only to preclude a *mauvaise foi* way of accepting SbP but avoiding relativism.

Section I is devoted to clarifying how “valuer” and “value” are to be understood here and what the immediate import of these two propositions is. Section II distinguishes SbP from three other propositions that have been advocated or criticized under the heading of “the subjectivity of values” and similar labels. Section III discusses consequences of SbP and ScP for justification in ethics. Section IV discusses and dismisses a concept of universality that is consistent with SbP and ScP.

I

Contrary to common philosophical practice, the term “valuer” is not being used here to refer exclusively to those who explicitly, reflectively evaluate things and are capable of saying things like “She has a beautiful complexion,” “He’s an honest man,” or “This is a very reliable automobile.” In addition to such explicit, reflective valuers, “valuer” will here cover those who can merely experience things as having value. For example, their behavior indicates that infants find being dry or wet, held securely or loosely, being fed or unfed, etc. to be conditions of different value, even though, presumably, they cannot reflect on such matters. Similarly, their behavior indicates that various nonhuman animals experience dry land to have one value and sea water another, and they do so, presumably, without being able to reflect on the matter. Such non-reflective beings are still “valuers” as the term is being used here. Phenomenologists often talk about “the lived world” and various ways of “being in the world”; what is meant here by a “valuer” is a being for whom value is a dimension of the world in which he lives.

As mentioned, many philosophers would restrict “valuer” and associated terms to intellectually accomplished beings, such as language users and the reflectively self-conscious. This restriction has been particularly prominent in denials of a right to life to human fetuses, nonhuman animals, and severely mentally compromised humans. For example, writing about the misfortune of death and why nonhuman animals cannot possess a right to life, Ruth Cigman contends 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. [It must] possess essentially the same conceptions of life and death as persons do. [It] must either understand death as a condition which closes a possible future forever, . . . or [it] must grasp, and then reject, this conception . . . . Either way, the radical and exclusive nature of the transition from life to death must be understood. 1

This sort of restriction simply does not ring true. While 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 over her marriage” but not “Spot values adventure over food”—we do commonly use a wide variety of evaluating terms when describing the mental states of those animals, e.g., “Spot likes to run on the beach,” “Spot wants to go for a walk,” “Spot would sooner go for a run with Billy than eat,” “Spot prefers Alpo to Kal Kan,” “Spot is afraid of the neighbor’s dog,” “Spot loves to be scratched behind the ears,” “Spot enjoys riding in the car,” and so forth. Such usages are not anthropomorphic, since there is nothing peculiarly human about liking, wanting, preferring, being afraid, loving, or enjoying, none of which requires the highly developed intellectual capacity which distinguishes us from other animals. Consequently, to interpret SbP as contending that “the existence of beings at least as intellectually accomplished as adult humans typically are is a necessary condition for things having value” would be to interject an intellectual (perhaps anthropocentric) bias into the discussion. We shall reject that prejudice and interpret SbP as referring to all those whose lived worlds contain values.

It does not follow from thus casting “valuer” loose from intellectual morings that everything now counts as a valuer. Presumably there are things for which things do not have value, e.g., plants and inanimate objects, natural or manufactured. Valuers can be distinguished from these non-valuing things by noting that something is a valuer if and only if it has at least one of the following:

(i) affective sensitivities, such as the ability to experience pleasant or painful sensations, to feel healthy or ill, and to feel aroused or enervated,

(ii) the ability to desire and have the affective experiences which go with one’s desires being fulfilled or frustrated, e.g., feeling pleased or pained, content or dissatisfied, gratified or annoyed, and elated or depressed,

(iii) needs whose fulfillment or frustration can occasion affective experiences similar to those in (ii).

The key point under all three of these headings is that valuers are, and non-valuers are not, beings who can have affective experiences.

While saying that plants “need” water and minerals in order to survive, grow, and flourish is unobjectionable, saying that plants “care about,” “like,” “enjoy,” “appreciate,” or otherwise value water and minerals would not be sensible. Such terms are out of place when the fulfillment or frustration of needs does not occasion affective experiences, and that seems to be the case with plants. Conversely, when we see a dog behaving in a distressed manner before and looking relieved after having a meal, we can sensibly say that it “liked,” “enjoyed,” “appreciated,” or otherwise valued its meal. Since we interpret the dog’s behavior as expressing affective experiences about the fulfillment of its needs, we have no difficulty applying these evaluative terms to the animal.

Furthermore, when the sincerity of someone expressing an evaluation is questioned—e.g., “Does the mayor really care about the homeless, or is she just posturing for the camera?”—what is commonly at issue is whether she “really feels that way about it.” Thus, although valuers need not be especially intellectual, they must be capable of having affective experiences.

It might be suggested that a being with intentions but incapable of affective experiences—a sophisticated robot, perhaps—could still find things of value, particularly of instrumental value. However, it is not clear that a being could be properly described as “intending” to accomplish some project if it was incapable of affective experience about the fulfillment or frustration of that project. We commonly describe machines as being “designed” or “programmed” to accomplish tasks, rather than as intending to accomplish them. Conversely, there would seem to be a contradiction involved in sincerely saying something like, “I intend to accomplish X but am indifferent to whether I succeed or not.” And when we undertake tasks about whose success we are indifferent, those tasks are routinely described as not being of value for us. That lack of value extends (ceteris paribus) to the means as well as the end, as anyone who has simply “gone through the motions” can attest. Therefore, the suggestion of supposed non-affective intenders does not pose an objection to characterizing valuers in terms of affective capacities.

Beings with any of these three affective capacities
may be characterized as “beings with interests.” In line with the earlier rejection of an intellectual bias, we must distinguish “having an interest” from “taking an interest” in something. “Beings with interests” refers to those who have interests, whether or not they are capable of taking an interest in things. Since mercury in the water will cause them to suffer, birds have an interest in mercury-free water, even though they presumably cannot comprehend pollution issues and, consequently, cannot take an interest in them. The same could be true of aboriginal groups, whose cultural backgrounds might also make it impossible for them to comprehend and take an interest in pollution issues, even though 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, grieve over still-born or malformed off-spring, be anxious about loss of vigor, fear dying, or the like.

Thus, insofar as X cannot occasion affective experience in P, P has no interest in X, and insofar as X can occasion affective experiences in P, P has an interest in X whether he realizes this and takes an interest in X or not. It follows that beings which are incapable of having affective experiences can have no interests at all. It also follows, from SbP, that if there are conscious beings who are incapable of having affective experiences, e.g., some of our science fiction androids, their “lived worlds” are devoid of values.

A second bit of needed explication concerns what is meant by saying that something “has value” or “is of value.” It is tempting to say that these phrases indicate that something falls into one of the following categories: (i) affective experiences, (ii) beings capable of having (i), (iii) things that can occasion (i) or maintain (ii), and (iv) things that can be useful for obtaining or maintaining (iii). However, while I think such an interpretation accurate, it would make SbP a tautology, and that would be inappropriate, since SbP is a substantive principle ruling out certain traditions and schools of moral philosophy, e.g., forms of natural rights theory and environmental ethics. Therefore, that interpretation should be the product of reflection on SbP and associated matters, not a clarificational starting point for such reflection. Consequently, I propose here to begin by interpreting those phrases in the following ostensive, non-question begging and hopefully not too vague, way: something has value or is of value insofar as it is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong, useful or useless, and so on. (“True or false” is not to be included here, and truth values are not covered by SbP and ScP.)

The claim made in SbP, then, is that the existence of beings with interests is a necessary condition for things being good/bad, right/wrong, etc. (Throughout the remainder of this paper, “SbP” will refer to this affective interpretation of the subjective principle.) This is not a trivial claim. It is inconsistent with Aristotelian concepts of the natural good of things, the natural hierarchy of being and value, and the proper place of things being determined by their natures. It is also inconsistent with the common belief that there are some things, e.g., genocide, racism, and sexism, which are “wrong even if nobody thinks they’re wrong.” And it is inconsistent with so-called “deep ecology” forms of environmental ethics, which in their opposition to anthropocentric evaluations of the environment insist that something’s value is (roughly) its contribution to the survival of its ecosystem. Hopefully, SbP is now clear enough for us to begin working with it.

Turning to the secular proposition, the point of ScP is to exclude God (as traditionally portrayed in Christianity) as a source of values. One way of accepting SbP and still securing for favored things a value independent of the vicissitudes of human history is to postulate a valuer outside of that history. Nonhuman animals could, logically, provide such a source. However, humans have not shown much respect for what other animals value, since they are supposedly “lower forms of life.” Therefore, this source of nonhuman values cannot do the job of commanding respect from us that people seeking such a source want done. So, a super-human being has traditionally been enlisted to ensure that such things as chastity and fidelity, acts of self-sacrifice and contrition, and even rivers and ecosystems have value whether or not contemporary society values them. ScP precludes such a postulate. Whether it follows, as Ivan Karamazov concludes, that “All is permitted!” is one of the issues we shall have to address.
II

A proposition like SbP can easily be confused with other propositions that have been advocated or criticized in discussions of hedonism, emotivism, or subjective ethics. I want here to distinguish SbP from the following three propositions:

1) when someone says that X has value what she is doing is indicating that she has certain affective experiences;
2) something is good only if it is valued;
3) only affective experiences have intrinsic value, with everything else of value having only instrumental value for the production of such experiences.

We shall deal with each of these in turn.

Proposition (1). In this century subjective value theories have frequently been linked to emotivist theories of the meaning of evaluations. Consequently, it might be concluded that SbP entails something like the position taken by Bertrand Russell in the following passage:

When a man says “this is good in itself,” he seems to be making a statement . . . . I believe this to be a mistake . . . . If what he says is interpreted as a statement, it is merely an affirmation of his own personal wish; if, on the other hand, it is interpreted in a general way, it states nothing, but merely desires something . . . .

The theory which I have been advocating is a form of the doctrine which is called the “subjectivity” of values. This doctrine consists in maintaining that, if two men differ about values, there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth, but a difference of taste.5

With all due respect, Russell’s analysis here is certainly mistaken. My claim that X has value is an evaluation of X, not (merely) an autobiographical statement or expression. Fortunately, SbP neither expresses nor entails Russell’s position. SbP is not a proposition about the meaning of sentences; it makes a claim about what is necessary for the existence of values. To draw a conclusion about the meaning of sentences from such a claim would be difficult. To infer immediately from “X requires Y in order to exist” that when we are talking about X we are really talking about Y would be to commit both a kind of genetic fallacy, confusing something with its conditions, and a kind of intentional fallacy, confusing the meaning of a sentence with what it (supposedly) really refers to. Consequently, SbP should not be confused with nor facilely linked to emotivism or any other theory of the meaning of evaluations.

Proposition (2). Theories which make values depend on experiences have been criticized for ignoring the distinction between something’s being good and its being valued, e.g., egalitarianism’s being an ethical good even in the Middle Ages, when it was not valued. Tom Regan makes this point in the following way:

It will be [said] that, if we cease to value cars, they must cease to be good. But this seems to confuse two logically distinct ideas—namely, (i) the goodness of things like cars and (ii) whether we value them or not. Something can be good and not be valued, just as something can be valued and not be good.6

Offering this distinction as an objection to propositions like SbP involves an obvious blunder; when we contemplate the goodness of something that is not being valued in its actual context, we are evaluating it ourselves. Consequently, there is a valuer around, even if only imaginatively, to whom the thing’s “real but unrecognized” value is related. And this status as the object of an imaginative evaluation seems to fit well the ephemeral, consequential status of values projected into a situation but unrecognized by those actually living there.

Furthermore, we can talk about such values in the same way that we talk about the redness of apples when no one is looking at them. “The unseen apple is red” can be understood to mean that its physical properties are such that if a being relevantly like us were to see the apple under normal lighting conditions, then the color that being would see is what we call “red.” That is, the “objective” redness of the apple is its capacity to influence certain beings in a certain way. It has this capacity whether or not it ever influences such a being in this way. Similarly, “The unvalued car is good” can be understood to mean that its physical properties are such that if a being relevantly like us wanted reliable (or fast or ostentatious or state-of-the-art or . . . ) transportation, knew how to use a car, had the materials necessary for using a car, and came across this car, then s/he would (ceteris paribus) positively value it. This capacity is something the car has whether or not any
being ever actually values the car. So, the car can be good in this way even though never valued. But this goodness retains an essential relation to the possible experience of beings with interests and is, therefore, consistent with SbP.

Many other supposed counter-examples to SbP can be handled in similar ways. These counter-examples all emphasize that we commonly find things to be of value without their being objects of our affective experiences. For example, a person can value money without having feelings or emotions about the stuff, and a man can value a vase because he knows his wife is fond of it without having feelings or emotions about the vase himself. These would be counter-examples to SbP if it were interpreted as claiming or entailing that to value something is to have an affective experience of it. But SbP neither claims nor entails this. SbP claims that something can be of value only insofar as it is related to some being’s interests, but it does not limit that relation to being the object of the valuer’s affective experience. The relation may be imaginative, hypothetical, instrumental, or indirect, as in the above cases, and psychologically complex, as in the case of values one unquestioningly holds subconsciously to avoid super-ego punishment. A wide diversity of relations between a thing’s being of value and affective experiences is consistent with the latter’s being a necessary condition for the former.

**Proposition (3).** Another criticism of propositions like SbP is that they entail that only affective experiences have intrinsic value and reduce everything else of value to having only instrumental value for the production of such experiences. This is at least part of what deontologists have traditionally found objectionable about hedonism and recently has been much criticized by environmental ethicists. For example, advocating “The Liberation of Nature,” John Rodman writes:

> If it would seem arbitrary to a visitor from Mars to find one species claiming a monopoly on intrinsic value by virtue of its allegedly exclusive possession of reason, . . . would it not seem almost as arbitrary to find that same species claiming a monopoly of intrinsic value for itself and those species most resembling it . . . by virtue of their common and allegedly exclusive possession of sentience? . . . The rest of nature is left in a state of thinghood, having no intrinsic worth, acquiring instrumental value only as resources for the well-being of an elite of sentient beings. Homocentrist rationalism has widened out into a kind of zoocentrist sentimentism.7

This sort of contention suffers from a confusion similar to that found in psychological egoism. Psychological egoists illicitly infer from “John felt pleased to help Mary” to “John helped Mary in order to feel pleased.” They thereby confuse an accompanying, perhaps even motivating, condition for a generous action with the goal of that action.8 Similarly, an illicit inference is being made here from “the value of things depends on affective experiences” to “things are valuable only as tools for producing affective experiences.” Here the confusion is between a necessary condition for something’s having value and the sort of value something can have.

The distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value concerns what sorts of value valuers do or ought to experience things as having. SbP is not a proposition about what sorts of value valuers experience things as having. Furthermore, the claim that affective experiences are necessary conditions for the existence of values does not entail that the individual experiencing something to be of value values it as a tool for producing such experiences. There would again be an intentional fallacy in such an inference. Nor is SbP an imperative to the effect that valuers ought to value everything but affective experiences as being of instrumental value for the production of those experiences. SbP makes a factual claim about a necessary conditional relationship; how that claim figures into pragmatic, aesthetic, ethical, or other evaluative concerns is not obvious. If we hold to the maxim that an “ought” cannot be derived from an “is”—and the weight of argument in the debate over this principle favors holding to it—then we cannot derive an imperative to value everything but affective experiences as tools for producing those experiences immediately from an assertion like SbP.

To avoid confusion here, it is helpful to differentiate two pairs of terms, one pair concerning how things come to have value and the other concerning the sorts of value things have. SbP contends that all other things acquire value through being related to affective experiences, which are themselves
experienced as having value. For example, \((ceteris paribus)\) something which causes pain has a negative value because pain is an unpleasant experience. Let us say that the value of affective experiences is “immediate,” while that of other things of value is “derivative.” Turning to the other pair of terms, derivative values can be of two sorts: instrumental and intrinsic. Things of instrumental value are valued for their capacity to produce other things, while things of intrinsic value are valued for properties they have that are not being regarded as capacities for producing things. Employing this terminology, we can understand that while SbP entails that the value of all things except affective experiences is derivative, it does not entail that the value of all these things is instrumental.

Those who raise this sort of objection to propositions like SbP may consider this change in terminology to be merely playing with words. However, that is not the case. Since we routinely experience many things other than affective experiences to have intrinsic value, to contend that SbP entails that only affective experiences are of intrinsic value is to contend that SbP contradicts ordinary experience. Separating the immediate/derivative distinction from that between intrinsic and instrumental values shows that there is no such contradiction. The change in terminology thus undermines what might have appeared to be a substantial objection to SbP.

III

This section concerns consequences of SbP and ScP for the justification of ethical values. It has frequently been alleged that propositions like these are inconsistent with an imperative to justify or reject ethical values through practical reasoning, thereby leaving ethical discussion a rhetorical contest at best. Moral philosophers have traditionally considered this an unacceptable conclusion, W. T. Stace even referring to it as “defeatism in morals.”\(^9\) We shall discuss these issues by responding to the following two questions:

(1) Do these propositions entail the sort of conclusion reached by Bertrand Russell in the above citation, i.e., that “if two men differ about values, there is not a disagreement as to any kind of truth, but a difference of taste”?

(2) Do these propositions entail that whatever is effective in swaying a person’s feelings or emotions about an ethical issue must be considered acceptable in forming ethical evaluations, thus rendering logical restrictions on what may be said or done to resolve ethical disagreements arbitrary?

Before responding to these questions, I want to distinguish SbP from a proposition concerning justification in ethics with which it might be confused. That proposition reads something like this: the ethical value of something is established by the ethical feelings we have when considering it. This sort of affective justification of ethical values selects a particular kind of affective experience, e.g., sympathy, treats such experience as a kind of perception, and contends that such experience is the ultimate criterion of ethical value. Although this sort of affective epistemology of ethics is consistent with SbP, SbP does not make or entail such a claim. SbP contends that things cannot have ethical value without being related to affective experiences, but just what that relation must be is left unspecified, as is just what affective experiences are involved. It follows that SbP is as consistent with utilitarianism, where a rational calculus of pleasures and pains is supposed to be employed to determine ethical values, as it is with a theory proposing that an ethical, affective intuition is to be employed to make such determinations. Consequently, the problems encountered by the latter epistemic position—e.g., how to resolve differences among ethical intuitions—need not be encountered by SbP.

Question (1). Turning to the first of the questions posed above, it is not true that SbP and ScP entail that concepts of truth and falsity cannot be applied in ethics. These propositions are consistent with ethical evaluations making instrumental claims, whose being true or false is not controversial, and with their having truth values “circumstantially,” “contextually,” or “historically.”

The above citation from Russell concerns intrinsic values, but the consequentialist tradition in ethics makes ethical values instrumental. According to that tradition, assertions that \(X\) is ethically good (bad) contain a claim (roughly) that \(X\) is useful for (detrimental to) the production of \(Y\), where \(Y\) is a goal of ethical endeavor. Such a claim can be true or false in the way that other causal assertions are. SbP
and ScP are clearly consistent with consequentialist ethical theories, which commonly refer to affective experiences, e.g., happiness, in formulating goals of ethical endeavor.

Turning to intrinsic values, what I am calling the “circumstantial” truth value of an evaluation derives from the fact that evaluations are commonly based in part on beliefs about matters of fact. For example, we may value X in part because we believe that X has property Y. Such beliefs are paradigms of things that can be true or false, and their truth value can be transferred to the evaluations based on them. That beliefs about matters of fact have truth values and that these truth values are transferred to evaluations is clearly consistent with SbP and ScP.

Circumstantially assigning truth values to evaluations is part of everyday experience. It is commonly said that an evaluation is “mistaken” if it is based on misinformation, as when we conclude that we made a mistake in choosing X, since it did not really have property Y. Saying that an evaluation is correct because it is based on true beliefs about matters of fact is not as common. This is due in part to the fact that we do not routinely assert that an assertion is true; we simply make the assertion. This is reflected in formal logic, where we do not have an operator for truth, although we have one for falsity. This asymmetry is likely due even more to the fact that the truth of an evaluation commonly derives from more than the truth of the information on which it is based. It would be commonsensical to say that an evaluation is true if it is based on correct information, logical reasoning, and the right evaluative principles. It follows that while being based on false information may be sufficient to render an evaluation false, being based on correct information cannot be sufficient to establish the truth of an evaluation. However, even with this ordinary language asymmetry, evaluations can still be and routinely are said to have truth values based on the truth or falsity of the beliefs about matters of fact on which they are in part based.

Another way in which evaluations can and commonly do have truth values may be labelled “contextual” truth or falsity. Evaluations are discussed and made within a context of accepted beliefs, some of which are evaluations. For example, in arguments about animal liberation, the disputants commonly agree that pain is bad and that inflicting pain unnecessarily is immoral. An evaluation is contextually true if it can be derived using all relevant, consistent evaluative beliefs accepted by all relevant parties and contextually false if it is inconsistent with those beliefs. That evaluations can be contextually true or false is clearly consistent with SbP and ScP.

It might be objected that using this concept of contextual truth an evaluation could end up both true and false, true according to those who subscribe to unquestioned evaluation set [A] and false according to those who subscribe to set [A']. Such an objection misrepresents the situation. When dealing with contextual truth, saying that an evaluation is “true” is shorthand for “true in contexts defined by [A].” The same is true of saying that something is contextually false. Consequently, there is no contradiction here, since saying that X is both true and false is just shorthand for “X is true in contexts defined by [A] and false in contexts defined by [A'].” That is no more remarkable than the fact that water is both a gas (in some contexts) and a solid (in others). An evaluation cannot be contextually both true and false in the same situation, since an evaluation cannot be both derivable from and inconsistent with a consistent set of evaluative beliefs. (If the set of relevant evaluative beliefs accepted by all relevant parties is inconsistent, then by definition evaluations cannot be contextually either true or false in this situation.)

Nonetheless, contextual truth and falsity may still seem to be a mirage. Can the unquestioned evaluations which define the context and provide the basis for determining the contextual truth or falsity of the evaluations at issue themselves be true or false? And if not, would that not compromise the contextual truth value of those derivative evaluations? The answer to the second of these questions is “Yes.” In the case of contextual truth, the relation is again one of transference. It would be paradoxical to assert that “X is true because it is derivable from [A], none of whose members is true.” Also, the idea of X being “derivable” from [A] presupposes that the members of [A] can be true or false. So, the possibility of contextual truth hinges on the possibility of the evaluations which help define a context being
true or false—and for our purposes, this possibility must be consistent with SbP and ScP.

In the case of ethical evaluations, the most basic context-defining determination is that of what makes a value an "ethical" value. Such a determination will identify what "ethical" means in contrast to both the non-ethical and the unethical. This determination is necessary to provide guidance for what will or will not be an appropriate and satisfactory answer to ethical questions. There can be no more basic determination, since prior to determining what makes a value ethical, the word "ethical" would have to be used vacuously. This determination will identify the grounds for ethical evaluations. For example, it might be held that ethical values are those which impartially concern the fulfillment or frustration of the interests of all concerned, and this would identify the general welfare as the grounds for ethical evaluations. Ethical evaluations are thus grounded in the determination of what an ethical value is, and this determination can itself be expressed in evaluative form, e.g., "The ethical thing to do is what will most benefit the general welfare." Our question then becomes: can a determination of what an ethical value is have a truth value—and is this consistent with SbP and ScP?

Insofar as such a determination is offered by a metaethical philosopher as a description of an actual "language of morals," it can be more or less adequate and accurate and thereby have a truth value in a straightforward, if not easily determinable, way. However, our question concerns determinations which actually define traditions of ethical practice, e.g., what identifies an ethical value as such for the Amish, and what identified an ethical value as such for the Conquistadors. Can these "lived" determinations have a truth value?

These evaluations can be true or false in the sense of those terms that is roughly synonymous with "real" and "merely apparent." For example, we equally commonly say of someone that "He really is sorry" or that "He truly is sorry" and that "She wasn’t really pregnant" or that "She had a false pregnancy." In the same vein, if $P$ really is a determination of what an ethical value is, i.e., if it defines a living tradition of ethical practice, then it "truly" is a determination of what an ethical value is. Conversely, if a determination is not a lived one, as (presumably) that of the Conquistadors no longer is, then it is not truly a determination of what an ethical value is. Let us call this "historical" truth and falsity. We can then say that it is the historical truth of unquestioned evaluative beliefs that provides the basis for the contextual truth or falsity of other evaluations.

That unquestioned evaluative beliefs have historical truth value is clearly consistent with SbP and ScP. Furthermore, according to these propositions there are no standards of what is ethical which exist independently of valuers or are established by an omniscient valuer. Consequently, traditions of ethical practice cannot be determined to be true or false by being compared to objective or omniscient standards. What remains is that it is by actually being practiced that ideas of what is ethical become real determinations of what an ethical act or life is and thereby truly define the meaning of "ethical." The same is true for ideas of what other kinds of value are, e.g., aesthetic and political values. Therefore, this concept of the historical truth of context-defining evaluations and falsity of would-be context-defining evaluations is not only consistent with but also implied by SbP and ScP.

It might again be objected that employing this historical concept of truth and falsity an evaluation could be both true and false, for it might actually be definitive of one context but only apparently so of another. For example, the Golden Rule might really define the context of ethical discussion and determination for the Amish but only be "paid lip service" by Yuppies. Once again, this sort of objection misrepresents the situation by failing to elicit what is meant by saying that something is true or false in the sense of those terms being employed here. To say that $G$ is an historically true ethical evaluation is to say that it really is definitive of a context of ethical discussion and determination; to say that $G$ is an historically false ethical evaluation is to say that it appears to be but is not really definitive of such a context. There is a contradiction here only if the two contexts in question are the same. If, as in the Golden Rule example, the contexts are different, then what is being said in saying that $G$ is historically both true and false is that $G$ really is definitive of context $A$ but only appears to
be definitive of context Y. That poses no logical problem and is readily intelligible, for although using "true" and "false" as roughly synonymous with "real" and "merely apparent" may not be their most common usage, it is not a stipulative definition but a part of ordinary language.

A further issue might be raised at this point: can unquestioned evaluations have a truth value in comparison to other such evaluations, e.g., be truer than another, and would this be consistent with SbP and ScP? We commonly do evaluate the basic evaluations of other ethical traditions, and such evaluations are sometimes expressed using truth value terms, e.g., "Nazism is a false morality." However, it follows from SbP, ScP, and our discussion of historical truth and falsity that attempts to discredit living traditions of ethical practice, e.g., Nazism, by claiming that they are not really ethical values at all are logically confused. Living traditions of ethical practice determine what ethical values really are; therefore, living traditions of ethical practice cannot fail to express real ethical values. Nonetheless, we can and do make comparative evaluations of other ethical traditions by using the values of our own ethical tradition as standards for evaluating other traditions. Consequently, something like Nazism can without contradiction be both historically true, because its principles continue to define contexts of ethical discussion and determination, and contextually false, because its principles are inconsistent with those of our ethical tradition.

Whether there are conceptual difficulties with such comparative evaluations and whether they can be made in ways which are consistent with SbP and ScP are not the real issues here. Beyond the confusion that can be created by using truth value terminology in making ethical evaluations, the questionability of such evaluations is not a conceptual but an ethical issue. From within our ethical tradition, it is questionable whether making such evaluations is fair and tolerant, shows due respect for autonomous agents, will contribute to producing a happier world, etc. Making such evaluations may be questionable on different grounds within other ethical traditions. But no matter what the grounds, the question concerns whether making such evaluations is consistent with the ethical values of the tradition in which the evaluator lives, thus occurring at the level of contextual rather than historical truth. Making such evaluations is clearly consistent with SbP and ScP. Thus, one can (logically) accept SbP and ScP yet deny the common and highly problematic relativistic claim that all ethical traditions are "equally valid." All that SbP and ScP preclude is claiming that ethical traditions of which one disapproves are not really ethical traditions.

To summarize, Russell's conclusion that disagreements about values are really differences of taste wherein "any kind of truth" cannot be the issue does not follow from SbP and ScP. Even where values are considered intrinsic, concepts of truth and falsity can, consistent with those propositions, be applied to evaluations, since such evaluations are not made in vacuo and since we routinely employ several other concepts of truth and falsity besides simple correspondence. However, assigning truth values circumstantially and contextually to evaluations involves using principles of evidence and inference, which leads to the second question posed at the beginning of this section: do SbP and ScP entail that observing such principles in forming ethical evaluations is arbitrary.

Question (2). SbP and ScP cannot entail what procedures we ought to follow in forming ethical evaluations or even whether we should place any limits on the procedures to be employed. That we ought to follow procedure X when forming ethical evaluations is an imperative expressing an evaluation, while SbP and ScP are claims about matters of fact. Again holding to the maxim that an "ought" cannot be derived from an "is," it follows that SbP and ScP cannot entail that we ought to follow this or that procedure. For the same reason, these propositions cannot entail that we ought not to place limits on the procedures to be followed in forming ethical evaluations.

This situation—that propositions like SbP and ScP cannot entail that we ought to follow the principles of practical reasoning when forming ethical evaluations—has been confused, particularly in discussions of relativism, with saying that it follows from propositions like SbP and ScP that observing the principles of practical reasoning when forming ethical evaluations is arbitrary. This latter contention, which attempts to derive an evaluation, "arbitrary,"
from claims about matters of fact, is not only different from but also inconsistent with the former. Furthermore, SbP and ScP are consistent with determinations of what makes a value an ethical value which would make observing the principles of practical reasoning definitive of ethics. For example, SbP and ScP are consistent with claiming that an ethical value is one that is arrived at by impartially determining through the use of practical reasoning how something will impact the affective experiences of all concerned. And employing the results of our response to question (1), if such a definition of “ethical” is part of a real ethical tradition, then using practical reason truly is definitive of ethics. Thus, SbP and ScP do not entail that all is permitted in making and arguing ethical values; rather, they leave questions concerning permissible methods for this to be answered by living ethical traditions.

IV

It is useful to deal briefly with another issue that is often raised in discussing propositions like SbP and ScP. It may be stated as follows. People who hold propositions like these commonly maintain that there are no universal values. However, the claim that the existence of values depends on the existence of valuers does not entail that the existence of universal values requires a universal valuer. It may be that there are some things which all valuing beings similarly, even identically, value. For example, it may be that all living, valuing beings deeply value being alive. Such shared values are properly called “universal.”

That there may be such universal values is more than a merely logical possibility. It would be surprising if beings with interests and capacities as similar as those of different groups of humans, or even of different mammalian species, living in similar worlds, and confronting similar problems did not ordinarily similarly value certain things. The existence of such values is also consistent with SbP and ScP, which do not entail that numerically different valuers have qualitatively different values. Although those propositions define a kind of relativistic position in ethics and although such positions have often been inferred from the variety of ethics that are practiced, the relativism of having values depend on valuers, none of whom establishes “the true value” of things, is not logically related to that variety.

However, this sort of universal value is importantly different from that ordinarily associated with a universal valuer. The purported values of a universal valuer have traditionally been maintained to be values which all other valuers (or at least those capable of moral agency) ought to respect and adopt. Put bluntly, if God considers something good, then we should, too. The universality of values shared by all valuers does not have this imperative component. Even if all valuers deeply value being alive, it could still be that, as Schopenhauer proposes, moral agents ought to overcome this attachment to life. Again, it may be that all valuers have a strong attachment to members of their own species—very few animals are cannibals—yet animal liberationists like Peter Singer argue that this attachment constitutes a form of prejudice, like racism and sexism, and ought to be overcome. Even if these recommendations seem far-fetched, they are not conceptually strange in the way a pronouncement like “I believe that there is a God and that He favors X, but I think we shouldn’t follow Him on this one” would be strange.

That a value is shared by all valuers is a factual matter, not a normative one. Consequently, that a value is “universal” in that sense does not determine how much importance should be given to it by those valuers capable of reflecting on, assigning priorities to, and changing their values. To infer from a value’s having this shared universality to its being a value that all valuers ought to endorse—i.e., to infer from descriptive to imperative universality—would be another violation of the maxim that an “ought” cannot be inferred from an “is.” Such an inference would commit the same logical blunder made in inferring from psychological to ethical egoism.

As noted above, a universal valuer has traditionally been sought to secure favored values against changes in what humans value. Attempts to find universal values without a universal valuer seem to be motivated by the same desire. SbP and ScP do not entail that all values depend on human history. Values can exist without regard to human history insofar as there are valuers or affective dimensions of human psychology which are unaffected by that history. However, fulfilling this desire to protect
favored values requires not only finding an ahistorical basis for them but also showing that humans ought to respect them. These are two distinct requirements; that a value is ahistorically based (and known by us to be so) cannot entail that we ought to respect it.

Furthermore, a consequence of SbP is that the kinds of value things have depends on the natures of the valuers on whom the existence of the values depends. For example, things are fragrant only in worlds inhabitable by beings with a sense of smell. Now, suppose that there are beings who employ reflection in determining the importance of values and that they do this, at least in part, on the basis of historically developed institutions. For example, the sight of a fellow creature’s suffering might inspire sympathy in such a being, thereby giving a positive value to relieving that suffering. However, whether he should act on that value would depend on the further (albeit often tacit) determination that acting on that value is the best thing for this individual to do in this situation and not an instance of letting one’s emotions run away with one, failing to consider the full ramifications of one’s action, etc. By hypothesis, this dimension of the sympathy-based value of relieving this suffering will be based, at least in part, on historically developed institutions, e.g., exemplars of saintly, courageous, and rational behavior. This capacity for reflective review could even be reflexive, so that such beings could consider the importance of reflecting, even though they could not, without becoming different sorts of beings, cease to reflect altogether. It follows that all the values in the lived worlds of such beings have a historical dimension. It follows also that if we are such reflective valuers, then SbP entails that ahistorical justifications for our values will prove inadequate.

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Received March 20, 1989

NOTES

2. René Descartes, who emphatically denies that nonhuman animals have reason and who certainly cannot be accused of a tendency to anthropomorphisms, makes a similar point:

As for the movements of our passions, even though in us they are accompanied with thought because we have the faculty of thinking, it is none the less very clear that they do not depend on thought, because they often occur in spite of us. Consequently they can also occur in animals.

From Descartes’ letter to the Marquess of Newcastle, dated November 23, 1646; this passage can be found in Animal Rights and Human Obligations, ed. by Tom Regan and Peter Singer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 63.


4. Again, it is interesting to note that Descartes, a dedicated foe of anthropomorphisms, observes that even though they never communicate thoughts, “all animals easily communicate to us, by voice or bodily movement, their natural impulses of anger, fear, hunger and so on” (op. cit., p. 66; this passage is from his letter to Henry More of February 5, 1649).

11. I say that false information "may be" sufficient to render an evaluation false, because a conclusion can, of course, be true, even though its premises are false, and we have no difficulty understanding a statement of the form "I chose X because I thought it had property Y; I was wrong about that, but it was a good choice anyway."

12. Using all these beliefs is required here because evaluations frequently qualify each other. For example, we may hold that X is good, but what follows from this will depend also on our evaluative beliefs about whether X is more or less important than Y, Z, etc.
