

CHAPTER 15  
TYPOLOGY OF SOCIAL VALUES

**15.1 Social values at the root of the crisis**

According to UCLA's annual survey of college freshman, approximately three-quarters of students canvassed in 2006 thought it was "essential or very important" to be well off financially. Another recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that 80% of college-age U.S. citizens see "getting rich" as a top life goal for their generation. Previous sampling by the Gallup Poll in the 1990s found that 80% of Americans earning more than \$75,000 a year said they would like to be richer.<sup>1</sup> These figures, even if only approximate, indicate that U.S. society places a high value on wealth. Put otherwise, they indicate that desire for wealth is a dominant motivation among the U.S. populace.

This ties in directly with the central thesis of Chapter 13, to the effect that desire for wealth is a major contributor to our environmental crisis. In very brief summary, the argument leading to this thesis is that desire for wealth drives economic production (section 13.2), that economic production is closely linked to ecological damage (section 7.1), and hence that desire for wealth is largely responsible for the worsening condition of the biosphere. The complex interactions between the ecological and economic factors involved are laid out more fully in section 13.6.

In another recent news item from the Associated Press, it was noted that two-thirds of today's U.S. college students ranked high on a scale measuring self-esteem, more than double the number of 20 years ago.<sup>2</sup> This report also mentions the UCLA results above, suggesting that possession of wealth is a source of self-esteem. As proposed by Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Chapters I and III), one reason people desire wealth is because its possession enhances public esteem of the possessor.

Possessing wealth not only attracts admiration from others, it also makes one feel good about oneself (says Veblen).

Most people desirous of wealth presumably understand that they will never become billionaires. Billionaires result when people already wealthy desire to become wealthier. For most of us, however, great wealth is not essential to self-esteem. Most of us are content with our lot if we have adequate income to satisfy our desires as consumers. Most people are content to “keep up with the Joneses” in the quantity of things they bring back from the mall.

Generally speaking, for people of mid-range incomes, self-esteem comes with being able to acquire the things one wants. Placing high value on acquisition is a defining characteristic of consumer society. Valuing acquisition, people keep going back to the mall and coming home with more purchases to impress their neighbors (Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption”).

The value attached to acquisition thus joins that attached to wealth as factors enabling the operation of free-market economies. Valuing wealth, corporate managers and stockholders are motivated to seek increasing profit. This is likely to involve marketing initiatives to stimulate consumption of the products their corporations sell (Figure 13.1).

For potential customers to respond to this stimulation, however, they must be antecedently inclined to spend their money on purchases (rather than saving it or giving it to charity). This is where the consumer value of acquisition comes in. Specialized marketing aside, what makes consumers ready to buy new products is the value they see in coming to possess them. Only when acquisition is established as a consumer value will people be ready to submit to the blandishments of targeted marketing.

For wealth or acquisition to be established values in a given society is for them actually to be valued by that social group. Their status in that case is not merely

theoretical, like the values (e.g., universal justice) recommended by normative ethics. Values established in actual societies influence the behavior of actual people. Their status is such that they have substantial effect in the societies concerned. In what follows, we will refer to them as *operative values*.

Section 15.3 below attempts to clarify what it means for a value to be operative in a given society. The chapter then proceeds to a classification of different sorts of social value, with attention to how different values interact. This will be useful in subsequent chapters, dealing with the replacement of one set of operative values with another.

Before any of this can be done, however, we need to be clear about the nature of the values in question. The following section addresses this topic.

## **15.2 The sense of the term ‘value’ in the present context**

The term ‘value’ has various usages. Mathematicians and logicians speak of values taken by formal variables (“let  $x$  be the square root of 2”). Numismatists speak of the monetary values of ancient coins, card players speak of the relative values of the several suits (hearts rank high than clubs), and economists speak of the market value of this or that commodity. Our discussion of values in this chapter is not concerned with any of these usages.

The meaning of the *noun* ‘value’ in the present context is tied to a particular sense of the *verb* ‘to value’. This is the sense it shares with ‘to esteem’ and ‘to consider worthy’. A social value is something valued within the society in question, meaning something thought of favorably or viewed in a positive light.

Let us contrast this sense of the noun with the other senses mentioned above. When logicians speak of the value taken by a variable, they are not talking about something they hold in esteem. When economists speak of the market value of a particular commodity, they are not talking about something considered especially worthy.

And so on for the face value of an ancient coin, and for the relative ranking of hearts and clubs. There is nothing in these other senses suggesting overt approval, whereas approval is essential to the sense now being explained.

A social value is something viewed in a favorable light within the society in which it operates. But what sort of thing becomes a social value when favorably viewed? It will be helpful to have a few examples at hand in dealing with this question.

One familiar example is the value of honesty. When the value of honesty is operative in a given social group, its members will tend to think of honesty in a favorable light. This means that they will generally approve of honest behavior in others, and generally will be guided by standards of honesty in their own behavior. What is viewed favorably is not the behavior as such, which might turn out to have unfavorable consequences. What is valued is the quality of honesty itself. Honesty is valued wherever it is found, in honest action, in honest speech, or in honest intent.

Another example is the value of moderation. Members of a society in which moderation is an operative value will generally look favorably on moderate behavior. They will encourage such behavior on the part of other people and will consider moderation a worthy standard in their own activities. The practice of moderation is looked upon as a commendable habit. What is valued is the exercise of moderation itself, as distinct from various forms of activity in which it might be evident.

Not all social values are morally uplifting. A social value is constituted by the approval of the society in question, even though other groups might view it with disapproval. The value of vengeance provides an illustration. Most of us have probably heard of societies in which harm inflicted on one family or clan by members of another calls for retribution against the offending group. Vengeance in such a society is looked on favorably. It is considered worthy to harm other people when vengeance is the motive. Violent action against the offending group will be met with approval when it is

viewed as satisfying a need for revenge. What society values in this case, however, is vengeance itself and not the violence committed in bringing it about.

In the first example, what is valued is the quality of honesty in its role as a standard of individual and group behavior. What is valued in the second example is the practice of moderation, which amounts to general esteem for a particular mode of conduct. In the third case the value illustrated is a motive for action, serving to authorize action taken under that motivation.

The definition of social value begun above can be taken a step forward with these examples at hand. A social value is a guide of behavior that is (or might be) generally approved in one or another given society. Such guides might take the form of standards, of practices, or of motives for action. Presumably they might take other forms as well. What is essential to a social value, at any rate, is that it meets with general approval (is valued) within the group concerned and that it influences behavior within that group.

One manner of influence is that values of this sort contribute to the shaping of individual *preferences*. In a society valuing moderation, individual members typically will prefer temperate over dissolute modes of behavior. Such values also can establish *priorities*. When the value of vengeance is operative in a given group, members of the group might tend to rank honor over forbearance, and forbearance in turn over acquiescence. Another role of social values is to serve as *criteria* for judging social acceptability within the group. In groups where honesty is an operative value, people will tend to judge dishonesty as socially unacceptable.

An attempt is made in subsequent sections of this chapter to characterize different roles values like these might play in one or another social context. By way of preparation, we turn next to a discussion of what it means for a value to be operative in a given society.

### 15.3 Operative social values

Vengeance serves as an operative value in some societies but not in others. The same may be said for the values of honesty and moderation. Let us attempt to identify the conditions that must be met for a given value to have operative status in a given social context.

As a beginning, we should note that a value's operative status is not directly tied in with character traits of the society's individual members. Take honest again as an illustration. Personal honesty is a trait of character, as is its opposite dishonesty. Most societies will have a mix of honest and dishonest members. But for honesty to be operative in a given society is not a simple matter of a certain proportion of its members being personally honest.

To be sure, it is entirely possible that the value of honesty might have operative force even in societies where a majority of members are personally dishonest. Honesty might be publicly esteemed in a society because of social tradition, or the influence of a conservative ruling class, while people in private go about their dishonest ways. This would be analogous to a society's endorsing marital fidelity in its public discourse while many individuals practice adultery in their private lives.

Nor is the operative status of a social value a direct function of what individual members value personally. An individual might be "honest by nature," yet have no particular view about whether honesty in general is a good thing. In a society of individuals thus disposed, honesty would not be an operative social value.

It is even conceivable that a preponderant majority of a society's members have a favorable view of honesty as individuals and yet that honesty not be an operative value in that society. This could happen if most members value honesty, but not very highly. If society at large attaches a higher value to financial success, for example, then financial success might crowd out honesty as an operant social value.

This is not to say that a society's operative values have *nothing* to do with individual character traits and value preferences. A group of honest people is more likely than not to attach a high value to honesty on a social basis. And a society in which honesty is an operative value is more likely than not to be comprised of a majority of honest members. Such correlations notwithstanding, we should avoid any attempt to define operative social values in terms of statistics pertaining to values of individual members. Not only would such a definition be arbitrary (is 90% honest membership required?; why shouldn't 62% be adequate?); but moreover the values of a society are more than summations of values held by individual members.

Personal values are features of individuals, whereas operative values are features of actual societies. Attempts to define the latter in terms of the former would be like trying to define a country's foreign policy in terms of the attitudes toward foreigners of its individual citizens. For present purposes, at least, let us proceed with a definition of operative social values that can be applied without reference to individual preferences.

We have already seen that a social value is something generally esteemed in the society concerned and that it serves in that society as a guide of behavior (section 15.2). At very least, a given value can be socially operative only if it meets these two basic requirements.

But more needs to be said about what meeting those requirements amounts to. For a value to be socially operative is for it to exercise a certain force. In many cases, the operative status of a value is exhibited in the way it influences interactions among people in social contexts. Let us continue with honesty as an example in attempting to characterize this influence.

When honesty is operative as a social value, people generally will view honesty with approval wherever they encounter it. They will appreciate manifestations of honesty in the behavior of other people. And other things being equal, they will tend to maintain

standards of honesty in their own behavior. One consequence of this general esteem for honesty is that people will tend to deal honestly with each other *as a matter of course*, unless under specific pressure to behave otherwise in particular circumstances.

Another consequence is that people will become *accustomed* to dealing honestly with other people. And just as they tend to treat others in a forthright manner, so they tend to expect honest treatment by others as their due return. While there will be exceptions to these tendencies of course, social interactions within the group generally will be characterized by integrity and mutual trust.

A further mark of an operative social value concerns its role in the explanation of interpersonal behavior. As just noted, when the value of honesty is operative in a given social context, honest behavior is expected as a matter of course. Because of this, manifestations of honesty for the most part do not call for explanation. Dishonesty, on the other hand, is considered deviant, and typically calls for explanation in egregious cases.

Besides being *self*-explanatory in this manner, when the value of honesty has force in a given social context it can contribute to the explanation of *other* behavior that is initially puzzling. For example, if a hurried customer at an automatic teller receives an extra \$20 bill, and takes several minutes to notify bank officials of the error, an intelligible explanation to an impatient companion might be “It was the only honest thing to do.” If the customer were questioned about driving away with the extra money, on the other hand, “It was the dishonest thing to do” would not count as a plausible explanation.

The operative force of honesty shows up in its influence on interpersonal relations. There are other social values whose influence is exercised primarily in the behavior of persons acting individually. One such is the value of comfort, which will figure prominently in the discussion of subsequent chapters. Let us consider the influence of comfort as an operative social value.

As a matter of fact, the value of comfort is prominently operative in many industrialized societies. One sign of this is that people generally seek comfort in their day-by-day circumstances. We generally dress in comfortable clothing, outfit our homes with comfortable furniture, and expect our work spaces to be maintained at comfortable temperatures. Lack of comfort, when we encounter it, is a condition to be remedied.

Given our own personal preference for comfort, moreover, we expect to find the same preference in other people. To facilitate sale of their products, furniture manufacturers try to design chairs and sofas their customers will find comfortable. To keep their employees from complaining, office managers try to keep their work areas at pleasant temperatures. And marketers of consumer products ranging from automobiles to bed covers realize that emphasis on comfort usually makes a good sales pitch.

The value of comfort also plays an explanatory role much like that of honesty examined above. In contexts where comfort is an operative value, people engage in activities conducive to comfort as a matter of course. As far as the resulting comfort is concerned, accordingly, such activities do not call for explanation. If something were said to be done for the sake of discomfort, on the other hand, further explanation would be required to make it intelligible (masochism, penance, comic effect?).

Moreover, comfort can serve in the explanation of behavior that is puzzling for other reasons. In the case of someone turning restlessly on an unfamiliar bed, for instance, the explanation might be that he or she is looking for a comfortable position. By contrast, it is hard to think of types of behavior for which “Because it is uncomfortable” would serve as a plausible explanation.

A value is operative in a given social context if it exercises the kind of influence illustrated by honesty and comfort in these examples. Let us draw on the features shared by these two illustrations to arrive at a general characterization of a value’s operative status.

For a value to be operative in a given social group requires (1) that it be held in general esteem by members of the group in question. Esteem of the requisite sort is shown by (a) a tendency on the part of its members to conduct their own affairs in accord with that value, and (b) a tendency to rely on other people in the group to do the same.

For a value to have operative status requires further (2) that the value typically plays an explanatory role, both (a) insofar as action taken in accord with the value does not thereby call for explanation, and (b) insofar as being in accord with the value can serve in an explanation of other puzzling behavior. When the value in question admits a direct contrary (as dishonesty to honesty, and discomfort to comfort), moreover, the contrary lacks this explanatory ability.

Requirements (1) and (2) apply to social values generally. For a social value of any sort to have operative status requires meeting these two conditions. Other conditions come into play in distinguishing social values of different types. Our purpose calls for distinctions among (A) approbatory, (C) commendatory, and (N) normative values. The remainder of the chapter is given over to these distinctions.

#### **15.4 Approbatory values**

A social value encourages one or another form of behavior within a particular social context. Social values might operate in the forms (among others) of standards, practices, and motives for action (section 15.2). The distinctions we shall be drawing among approbatory, commendatory, and normative values have to do with differences among such forms. The first two pertain to motives for action. We begin with approbatory values (A).

There are various impulses to action that generally are considered to be “hard-wired” or innate. Such motivating factors are established genetically and not by socialization. Among such impulses are the natural need for food and drink, the instinct

for self-preservation, and the desire for sexual pleasure. To say that these impulses are not determined by socialization is to say that they hold more or less constant across all societies.

Although such impulses are present in all societies, there nonetheless are vast differences in the kinds of behavior they motivate. For example, consider the wide variation in response to the need for food and drink, ranging from the gluttony typical of a Roman banquet to the ritual fasting of an abstemious religious community. Other examples can be found in the ways different societies regulate the natural urge for procreation and in different mores regarding the choice of sexual partners. Whereas the underlying needs and desires are culturally invariant, the ways in which different groups respond is a matter of social conditioning.

Social conditioning of responses to inborn urges takes place largely through the formation of social values.<sup>3</sup> A major role is played by values of an approbatory sort. The primary effect of such values is to *sanction* certain types of response to natural promptings by implicit social approval.

Consider the approbatory value of pleasure as an example. Pleasant experiences are typically induced by eating and drinking, by sexual activity, by relief from discomfort (e.g., heat and cold), and so forth. When a particular activity is undertaken for the pleasure it provides, we say that pleasure is the *motive* of that activity. Gaining pleasure is the motivation or purpose of the behavior in question.

When operative, the social value of pleasure constitutes tacit approval of pleasure as a motive for action. By being operative, the value of pleasure conveys social endorsement of pleasure as an acceptable goal to be pursued. Entering into an activity because of the pleasure it provides is generally viewed in a favorable light. While things unavoidably may go wrong in pursuit of that goal, society generally approves of the goal itself.

As characterized above, a social value has operative status in a given group when (1) the value is esteemed by members of the group generally, and (2) acting in accord with that value is sufficiently common not to call for explanation. In the particular example at hand, for pleasure to be operative as a social value is, first and foremost, for members of the group to view gratification of natural desires in a positive light. Individuals tend to seek gratification in their own activities, and expect other people to do the same as a matter of course. When pleasure is an operative social value, moreover, gratification of natural desires generally does not require explanation itself; and otherwise puzzling behavior becomes intelligible with the realization that it was undertaken in pursuit of pleasure.

What makes pleasure an approbatory value is the nature of the warrant it provides. Insofar as the value is operative, it indicates general social approval of activity undertaken for the pleasure that follows. Its operative status has the effect of sanctioning such activity in the sense of tolerating or condoning it. Seeking pleasure is approved in the sense of being socially condoned, at least to the extent that countervailing values (like moderation) do not come into play.

But the approval in question does not extend to a *recommendation*. Nor does the operative force of pleasure as an approbatory value amount to a general *mandate* for pleasure-seeking activity. Recommendations and mandates are the business of commendatory and normative values, respectively. The approval built into pleasure as an approbatory value does little more than render pleasure-seeking an acceptable activity, which is to say one worthy of being pursued other things being equal.

When pleasure is in force as an approbatory value, members of the group concerned will tend to pursue pleasurable activity when an opportunity presents itself. Unless conflicting values come into play, they will do so expecting the approval of other people. Moreover, they will feel free to seek out occasions for pleasurable activity, and

even to devise opportunities on their own initiative. A society characterized by pleasure as an operative value is one in which pleasure-seeking is generally approved.

Let us look at another value that often has approbatory force. According to Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*), Epicurus defined pleasure as freedom from pain. Most theorists of bodily sensations today, however, would probably agree with Adam Smith in his criticism of Epicurus (in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part VII, Section II, Chapter II), holding that pleasure and absence of pain are qualitatively different. At any rate, the instinct of pain-avoidance seems distinct from the desire for bodily pleasure. Pain-avoidance is another approbatory value, perhaps even more widely operative than pleasure in human society.

The value of pain-avoidance is approbatory in that it sanctions evading pain as a motive for purposeful action. We wear shoes when walking on gravel because of the pain of going barefoot. And we choose anesthesia when having a tooth extracted because of the pain that would be experienced otherwise. On those rare occasions of deliberately submitting to pain (e.g., the prick of the anesthesia needle), most of us do so only to avoid greater pain in the future. Such activities are socially acceptable to the extent that pain-avoidance is an operative social value.

Despite the prevalence of this value among human societies generally, however, there are various social contexts in which it is held in abeyance. One such is in athletic contests like boxing and rugby, where avoiding pain is likely to signify flagging commitment. In many cultures, moreover, learning to endure pain seems to be part of “growing up to be a man.”<sup>4</sup> Counter-cases like these indicate that pain-avoidance is not universally operative as a social value. Its presence in one or another social context is a consequence of socialization.<sup>5</sup>

For purposes of general taxonomy, it should be noted that values both of pain-avoidance and of pleasure come in more and less nuanced forms. Whereas some social

groups might value pleasure-seeking across the board, others might approve of seeking pleasure through eating but not through sexual activity, or vice versa. Similarly, pain-avoidance might be approved without qualification in some social contexts, whereas approval is withheld in others under particular circumstances (e.g., athletic contests).

Drawing on these illustrations, we may attempt to formulate a general characterization of approbatory values. The key feature of such values is that they constitute group approval of one or another natural urge or instinct as a motive for behavior. The factor *motivating* the behavior is the urge or instinct itself. What the value in question contributes is a general endorsement of that particular motivation.

An approbatory value is operative to the extent that the motives it endorses are looked on favorably within the social group, and as such are viewed as “normal” and not requiring explanation. In this respect, approbatory values share the features of social values generally. A mark of approbatory values specifically is that they leave people free to act according to the value whenever an occasion arises. Given blanket clearance of this sort, the agent might seek actively to expand the range of circumstances in which the concerned motive can be exercised.

It should be noted at this juncture that lack of operative status on the part of a given approbatory value does not by itself amount to social disapproval. For example, there might be contexts in which pleasure-seeking is neither approved nor disapproved by values that have operative status. In such cases, other types of social values would be needed to dissuade people from acting on their natural instincts and urges.

### **15.5 Commendatory values**

A further dimension of social approval comes into play when society holds up a particular manner of behavior as commendable or praiseworthy. In the case of approbatory values, the approval involved amounts to little more than treating a certain

kind of behavior (such as pleasure-seeking) as socially acceptable. With commendatory values, on the other hand, the endorsement involved has the force of a positive recommendation. The difference is analogous to that between an automotive magazine giving its “stamp of approval” to several models and singling out just one model it particularly recommends.

In the case of an approbatory value, furthermore, the behavior in question is motivated by a natural desire or instinct. But in the case of commendatory values, the relevant behavior is motivated by social approval itself. The driving force in the first case is an inborn urge, while in the second it is an inclination to do what is advocated by one’s social group.

Once again, pleasure-seeking behavior takes forms dictated by the structure of the organism’s nervous system. Being “hard-wired” in this fashion, such behavior tends to be culturally invariant. Behavior *motivated* by group approval, on the other hand, varies substantially from culture to culture. The reason is simply that different forms of behavior are encouraged by different societies.

In a straightforward sense of the term, behavior driven by group approval is shaped by social conditioning. There are various ways in which behavior can be affected by social conditioning, including operant conditioning, imitation, and cultural inheritance. Another way is through the influence of commendatory values. Let us see how this works with the help of a few examples.

Moderation was introduced in section 15.2 as an example of social values generally, without mention of any particular type. In fact, it is a typical instance of what we are calling commendatory values. In its commendatory role, moderation reflects society’s general estimation of moderate behavior as especially praiseworthy. When the value of moderation is operative in a given social context, people will react favorably to moderate behavior whenever they encounter it.

As with all social values, moderation is operative when it is generally viewed with favor in the relevant social context and when moderate behavior is typically understood as not requiring explanation. A distinctive feature of moderation as a commendatory value is that people tend to look upon temperate behavior as deserving commendation. People tend to agree that such behavior is particularly admirable.

Moreover, the force of moderation as a commendatory value is both retrospective and forward-looking. As well as commending moderation in actions already accomplished, people will generally agree in recommending it as a feature of future activity as well. Save in exceptional circumstances (e.g., responding to imminent danger), moderation is deemed praiseworthy in actions both past and future.

Interestingly enough, moderation shows up (as temperance) in standard lists of both Aristotelian and Christian virtues.<sup>6</sup> And most other virtues on either list would probably correspond to commendatory values that might be operative in specific social contexts. As already noted (section 15.3), however, virtues are character traits of individuals, whereas social values are characteristics of social groups. What it is for a value to be operative in a given society cannot be defined in terms of character traits of its individual members. But this does not preclude consideration, in subsequent chapters, of the influence various virtues like temperance would have on individual behavior if adopted as operative values in a given social context.

It should come as no surprise to realize that not all commendatory values would meet with approval among ethical theorists. An example is the value of comfort, discussed previously (section 15.3). Comfort seems to be operative as a hallmark of consumer society. Consumers look favorably upon the acquisition of commodities (such as air-conditioners) that bring comfort to the user, and they consider comfort a major desideratum when relevant in future purchases. Advertisers are able to capitalize on our

predilection for comfort by featuring the ease and contentment their products can be expected to bring.

Other commendatory values bound up with consumerism, and hence ethically suspect, are convenience, self-interest, and acquisition. A key value in this regard is that of wealth itself (section 13.2). The influence of such values on societies concerned is discussed at some length in the following chapter.

Commendatory values like moderation, convenience, and comfort might be termed “positive,” inasmuch as they *encourage* activities in which certain distinctive characteristics are notably present. But there are other values with commendatory force that encourage the *absence* of certain features, and hence might be called “negative.” Negative values of this sort *discourage* the presence of certain distinctive characteristics. An example would be a value discouraging pursuit of pleasure-seeking activity.

What a society would commend, if such a value were operative, is a general *inoperancy* of the pleasure motive. In effect, for such a value itself to be operative would amount to general endorsement of practices and modes of behavior that reject pleasure as a suitable goal of action. Abstaining from pleasure not uncommonly is advocated as a virtue among world religions,<sup>7</sup> and is actively practiced in various religious communities. For a secular example, Victorian England came to be known for its low estimation of sensual pleasure. In social contexts like these, pursuit of pleasure is viewed with disapprobation.

These observations can be drawn together in a general characterization of commendatory values. Such values bring social esteem to bear in recommending certain practices or behaviors as particularly desirable. A sign of such values being in force is general agreement among members of the group that the relevant modes of behavior are worthy of encouragement. This agreement shows up both in evaluating past action and in shaping action yet to be undertaken. Motivation for acting in accord with the value

comes from a desire for the social approval involved, rather than from an inborn urge for one or another sort of gratification.

Religious practices aside, the social encouragement extended by commendatory values does not amount to a mandate. In most societies where moderation is viewed as praiseworthy, immoderate behavior would be frowned upon but probably not prohibited. In societies commending comfort, for another example, accepting discomfort may raise eyebrows but is not deemed a transgression. Commendatory social values neither dictate nor forbid. These effects come into play with normative values instead.

### **15.6 Normative values**

Just as there is an overlap of sorts between commendatory values and the traditional virtues (both encouraging certain practices considered praiseworthy), so normative values share features with the dictates of traditional ethical theory. In one version, Kant's categorical imperative prescribes treating persons affected by one's actions as ends in themselves. Actions complying with that prescription are right, whereas non-compliance is wrong. Similarly, when the normative value of honesty is operative in a given social context, honest behavior is right and hence required while dishonesty is wrong and hence forbidden.

The distinction between right and wrong becomes a factor with normative values. Like their commendatory relatives, normative values recommend certain forms of behavior as particularly desirable. What sets them apart is the force of this recommendation. The characteristic feature of normative values is the disjunction they set up between acceptable (right) and unacceptable (wrong) social behavior. For one type of behavior (e.g., honesty) to be prescribed is tantamount to its opposite (dishonesty) being unacceptable. And what is deemed unacceptable according to a given normative value is expressly singled out as requiring correction.

This distinction between right and wrong invites comparison with the difference between positive and negative commendatory values. An example of the positive sort is a value encouraging behavior conducive to comfort. Negative commendatory values are exemplified by a value encouraging the avoidance of uncomfortable behavior. While the two values of course might operate simultaneously, it should be noted that operancy of the former value (recommending comfort) does not require that the latter (recommending avoidance of discomfort) is operative as well. Avoiding discomfort is more than merely seeking comfort. For a society to encourage the pursuit of comfort (e.g., in purchasing consumer products) does not entail its taking a stand on behavior undertaken regardless of the discomfort that results (e.g., exercising).

With normative values, however, prescribing a certain type of behavior has the same force as proscribing its opposite. If society values honesty in a normative fashion, by the same token it values the absence of dishonesty. Right and wrong cover all options, in the same manner as a switch being on or off. If honesty is right, so is avoiding dishonesty; and if dishonesty is wrong, so is departing from honesty.

A normative value establishes a norm of acceptable behavior. In the relevant sense, a norm is a standard that must be met to qualify a performance as adequate for a particular purpose. To gain credit for a course in many colleges, by way of analogy, students must earn a grade no lower than D. Failure to meet that standard results in withholding of credit. Similarly, in order to avoid sanctions engaged by wrong behavior, a person must meet the standards defining right behavior within the relevant social context.

For a normative value like honesty to be operative in a given social context, accordingly, requires not only that it is deemed praiseworthy and beyond need for explanation. These conditions hold for all operative social values. For a normative value to be operative also requires that it serve as a society-wide norm distinguishing

blameworthy from praiseworthy activity. Behavior judged blameworthy by that standard is socially unacceptable and considered to be in need to correction.

When honesty is operative as a normative value, for example, honest behavior is considered obligatory, whereas behavior that deviates from the norm of honesty will be considered defective and expressly forbidden. Failure to abide by the norm will be met with sanctions, including (but not limited to) qualms of conscience and public censure. Sanctions in some case might be intended as punishment, in others as incentives to proper behavior.<sup>8</sup>

By way of generalization, we may say that a value has normative status in a given society if it is looked on as praiseworthy and not requiring explanation, and if in addition it serves as a norm distinguishing socially prescribed from socially proscribed behavior. As a rule, this distinction will be marked by a public readiness to label prescribed and proscribed behavior “right” and “wrong,” respectively. Wrong behavior, furthermore, will be met with sanctions tending to discourage repetition.

Other normative values to be discussed in following chapters include equity, justice, and impartiality. Like most other social values, norms of this sort might come with built-in limitations. For instance, although societies conceivably might exist in which honesty is required without exception, the more common case is for it to be mandated under some circumstance but not under others (e.g., political discourse). Similarly, it is not hard to find cases where justice prevails in mainline society but has little influence along its fringes.

### **15.7 Interactions among types of value**

The foregoing typology of social values is motivated by the analysis undertaken in previous chapters of the underlying cause of our environmental crisis. The crisis consists of the biosphere being loaded down with more entropy than it can get rid of.

According to our analysis, this overload of entropy results primarily from the increasingly massive amounts of energy consumed by the world's industrialized economies. Increasing amounts of energy are required for economic growth, which is driven in turn by desire for wealth. Inasmuch as wealth is highly valued in contemporary society, it turns out that our appetite for wealth is a primary source of our environmental crisis.

Boiled down to bare essentials, this means that human society as we know it is being undermined by its own prevailing values. If this line of analysis is even approximately correct, the most feasible way out of the predicament will be to rid society of the particular values that lead to the crisis. Whatever else this amounts to, it involves rendering certain prevailing values inoperative and replacing them with others. This of course requires identifying the offending values (wealth is only one among several). This task is left for the next chapter. The remaining task of the present chapter is to gain a preliminary understanding of how change in social values might be brought about.

A first step is to observe that the three types of social value distinguished above are hierarchically ordered with respect to force. Approbatory values (such as pleasure) constitute social approval of certain natural instincts and urges as motives for action. Commendatory values (such as moderation) bring social pressure to bear in recommending certain practices and forms of behavior. Normative values (such as honesty), in turn, establish standards distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable activities, prescribing the former and forbidding the latter.

Approbatory values have the force of approving behavior undertaken for certain preexisting motives. Commendatory values have the force of recommending certain forms of behavior, and thus of motivating the behavior in question. Since approval goes along with such recommendation, of course, the force of recommendation includes that of

approval. In its effect, the force of recommendation is more extensive than that of mere approval.

Normative values require certain forms of behavior. But doing what is required is obviously recommended. Accordingly, the force of normative values is the most extensive of all. What is required is recommended, and what is recommended is approved. In addition to their own effect of mandating certain behaviors, normative values also have the force of both commending and approving the activities in question.

In their negative mode, normative values proscribe behaviors that fall short of the relevant standard. What is forbidden, of course, is neither approved nor recommended. In this mode, accordingly, normative values have the force to countermand both approbative and commendatory values.

Along with wealth and various others, the value of pleasure plays a major role in today's highly commercialized society. As such, the value of pleasure appears to be one that should be rendered inoperative in the interests of a healthy environment. With an eye on the interactions among types of values laid out above, it is interesting to consider how that might be brought about.

The value of pleasure is operative in consumer society to the extent that doing things for pleasure is generally approved. An obvious way of lessening the force of this value would be to diminish this general approval. Various tactics for accomplishing this are suggested in the final chapter.

Another step in this direction would be to set in place a value with opposing force. One such might be the social value of austerity, in the sense of renouncing bodily pleasures. Since there seems to be no inborn urge for austerity, this moves us into the range of commendatory values. If austerity gained the commendation of society at large, it would go a considerable distance toward rendering the value of pleasure inoperative.

An effective combination would be simultaneously to diminish the approbatory force of pleasure and to increase the commendatory force of austerity.

Yet another possibility would be to establish some value like austerity (maybe asceticism) on a normative basis. For example, if asceticism were operative as a normative value, pleasure-seeking as its opposite would be automatically proscribed. This not only would divest pleasure-seeking of approbatory status, but also would enlist a countervailing value. With the establishment of asceticism in a normative role, pleasure-seeking would be considered unacceptable and would be subject to sanctions when it occurred.

This survey of possibilities gives us at least a tentative idea of how environmentally damaging values could be removed from social dominance. The next chapter attempts to single out prime candidates for removal.

#### Notes

1. These figures have been widely reported. See, for example, *South Bend Tribune*, Jan. 23, 2007; also <http://www.abqtrib.com/news/2007/jan/23/uclas-survey-shows-wealth-top-priority-most-colleg> (accessed January 2007), and <http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?id=866> (accessed February 2009).
2. *South Bend Tribune*, Feb. 27, 2007.
3. This is not to say that social conditioning shows up only in the formation of social values. According to some social theorists (e.g., Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Doubleday, 1966), social conditioning can also affect our perceptions of reality and of the world at large. Neither is it to say that when the socialization in question involves social

values, it takes place through the formation of such values exclusively. Social conditioning of values very likely involves neurological adaptations as well.

4. Pain-endurance is integral to the spirituality of certain Native American cultures. An example familiar to movie-goers of the 1970s is the extremely painful ritual of vertical chest suspension, shown in the movie “A Man Called Horse.” This borders on other religious practices in which self-inflicted pain is considered valuable in itself, such as the self-flagellation of certain Christian and Shi’ite Muslim sects (illustrated in Dan Brown’s semi-fictional recent novel *The DaVinci Code*).

5. Pain response may be innate, but not social approval of pain-avoidance.

6. A representative list of Aristotelian virtues would include courage, temperance, fortitude, munificence (an attitude toward money), magnanimity (well-founded self-esteem), and patience. Christian virtues include, first, the Theological (spiritual) virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and next the Cardinal virtues of wisdom (prudence), temperance, justice, and fortitude. Other Christian virtues often listed are humility, chastity, patience, and diligence.

7. In his Reply to Objection 4, Article 3, Question 85, Part Three of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas affirms that abstaining from pleasure is a virtue pertaining to temperance. Similar teachings can be found in Buddhism and Islam.

8. In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham suggested that the pain accompanying social and moral sanctions contributes “binding force” to laws and rules of conduct.