

ON A DESCRIPTIVE THEORY OF VALUE A REPLY TO PROFESSOR MARGOLIS

by Stephen C. Pepper

Professor Margolis in his article "Facts and Values and Sciences of Value" pays me the compliment of naming me as a typical exponent of a descriptive theory of value and of quoting a brief summary of my view. I suppose my view would be classified as an example of a cognitive naturalistic theory of value. I hold that values can be adequately described as a particular type of facts and occurrences in nature by means of descriptive statements and hypotheses open to direct or indirect confirmation or disconfirmation by the facts referred to. There is no need of supernatural or nonnatural entities to explain or support them, no need of special modes of intuition or a priori cognition to become apprised of them, no need of a special nonfactual category to refer to them, no need of a special logic of values distinct from the logical methods worked out in the natural and social sciences. In this sense a science of values is possible and is already being developed in a scattered way in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics, as well as in philosophy. What is mostly lacking just now is a systematic theory to bring these results into relation with one another.

CONCEPT OF A SELECTIVE SYSTEM

Such a general theory I undertook to offer, as a number of others have done before me, in my *The Sources of Value*. Margolis wrote an extended review of this book in 1959, to which he refers in a footnote. He was unsympathetic with the approach and, I feel, never caught the impact on value problems of the central organizing concept of the theory—namely, that of "selective system." The distinctive characteristic of this concept is that it describes certain types of natural processes and situations which contain normative selections of acts within their own structures. That is, in describing the operation of these structures, one finds he is describing pro and con, correct and incorrect, accepted and rejected, activities relative to a norm dynamically imbedded in the structure. One of the most important of such structures in the field of human values is a purposive act.

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Let me illustrate with a simple purposive act we are all familiar with, that of taking a shower. Such an act is obviously a natural occurrence at some definite time and place. Take my own shower bath of this morning. Let us pick up the activity at the moment before I pull back the shower curtain and step into the tub. Any contemporary man watching me would clearly observe that I am performing a succession of acts directed toward turning a knob at the head of the tub to release water for a shower. I can similarly observe myself in this succession of bodily acts. They are not a group of disconnected acts such as finding myself brushing off a fly, looking at the clock, and sneezing in close succession. They are a series of acts only adequately described as guided by a dynamic disposition or drive to have a shower. It happens in this instance that I have also introspective acquaintance with the desire for a shower and of anticipations of the acts needed for this purpose and the felt qualities of these acts in their successive performance.

It is worth noting that within this act we have also an example of evaluative grading: the temperature of the water can be graded from ice cold to steaming hot. Objective comparative judgments can be made on the degree of hotness of the water. So apples can be graded as to their degree of soundness or rottenness. These constitute the graded "values" of the apples. So we might speak of the graded "values" of the water from hot to cold. Urmson and others have made a lot of this conception of values. And in one usage of "value" this conception can be developed. But it does not become humanly normative unless a dynamic disposition sets up one of these grades of the series as a norm for selection—that is, unless the graded series falls within a dynamic selective system.

Now, in taking my shower this morning I regulated the shower for a degree of warmth relative to a certain describable physiological condition of my body at the time for the optimum satisfaction available. I turned the knob from being a little too cold to being a little too hot (that is, from slightly incorrect acts on my part) to just the degree of temperature that was fully satisfying (that is, the correct degree of temperature the water *ought* to have for my fullest bodily satisfaction). At another time, after a strenuous game of tennis, the optimum temperature for my body condition would be a certain degree of coldness. These evaluative judgments are determined by the normative action of my consummatory selective systems at these times. They are describable and predictable. The "ought" contained in these actions is a special sort of "is" that determines pro and con selective responses

controlled by the normative action of an easily describable selective system.

Now let us turn to an example that is not confined to a single individual or the selective system of a personal situation, but involves two persons in the selective system of a social situation. Take an instance of an act of loving sexual intercourse. Let it be one in which there are not any external interferences. The children are all snugly abed. The boundaries of the situation are clear, and a period of time opens up for full mutual consummatory enjoyment. Such a situation also has its normative structure for the attainment of optimum satisfaction. Among other things it aims for the climaxes of the participants to come at about the same time. That is, there is an art of loving which both persons are sexually drawn to fulfill.

Now, this example is important, for it shows that in passing from a personal to a social situation, the mode of normative action of a selective system does not necessarily radically change. Many writers, especially today, write as if some tremendous difference in normative judgments occurs in the transition from individual behavior to social behavior. Individual, practical, means-end action and personal prudence are perhaps describable in scientific causal terms, they say, but the problem of values only begins in the social sphere. For here we come upon *moral* values. These, such writers continue, entail norms and logical predicates and types of reasoning that are beyond the range of descriptive statements. This seems to be the sort of argument Margolis is making.

But the transition is not so great. A social situation determines a normative aim in much the same way that a personal situation does. The difference is an adjustment among the goals of a number of persons involved instead of among the means available for a single purposive goal or for an adjusted group of an individual's goals. The sanctions required become somewhat different. But, in both cases, it is the normative structure of describable selective systems that determines the incorrect acts blocked or punished in one way or another and the correct acts rewarded. Social situations tend to develop social institutions with special sanctions and cultural patterns embodying the experience of human societies. And these in turn are subject, in my view, to the adaptive action of biological natural selection upon such structures as social groups. All of these selective systems and their modes of selective action are describable in principle, and much about them has been described in fact.

In relation to one another, these selective systems may be arranged

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in a sort of series from individual consummatory acts and purposive achievements in means-end activities, through personal situations, to social situations, social institutions, and cultural integrative patterns, and finally to natural selection in its impact on social structures. And I note that the dynamics of individual purposive drives, whether instinctive or acquired, is distinct from that of biological natural selection based on adaptive processes. I have found no reason to believe that an empirical theory of values cannot be worked out in terms of confirmable hypotheses describing these selective systems and their dynamic interactions.

OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS

In his criticisms of this sort of theory, I find that Margolis makes three main types of objection. He states in this issue (p. 253) that "Pepper never says how the norms associated with either of these two poles [of purposive satisfactions and of biological adaptation] are supported on *empirical* grounds, or how conflicts between them may be normatively resolved on empirical grounds." This objection seems to arise from an oversight on Margolis's part. The pivotal concept here is that of social pressure. This arises when there is some lack of adaptation among the institutions in a society to the existing conditions. Either the institutions are too lax or inadequate to yield the security required, or they are too strict to admit of available individual satisfactions as a result of changed social or environmental conditions. In the former case greater institutional centralization of control is generally required; and selective action is generally taken to attain it. In the other case, more decentralization. This is an empirical hypothesis open to empirical confirmation. And it is one that has much easily accessible empirical evidence to support it.¹

Margolis offered another criticism in his review of *The Sources of Value*, where he states pejoratively that selective systems are nothing but feedback systems. This statement is exactly true. And it plays directly into the body of evidence for the empirical naturalistic theory I support. The selective systems that produce the norms for human conduct are those natural feedback systems that apply directly to human individual and social behavior. Margolis extends his objections to suggesting that such a theory would project values into the whole extent of organic and inorganic occurrences, contrary to ordinary and also traditional professional usage of value terms. The argument from usage is not one that has much scientific appeal. But this objection is easily taken care of by prescribing that the term "values" for

our theory be limited to the feedback systems that apply only to human (and, may we not add, animal?) docile adaptive behavior.

His third criticism is one that implicitly pervades his whole article—namely, that a cognitive empirical naturalistic theory does not provide for “moral values . . . , those that concern overriding (normative) values and not merely the (conditionally) normative values to which we may happen to subscribe.” I am not quite sure what these “overriding values” may be. But it seems obvious that the values arising from normative selective systems would be classified by Margolis as “conditionally normative values.” These latter, he seems willing to admit, may be expressed in descriptive sentences confirmable in terms of the interests and institutions originating them.

Where then is the evidence for his “overriding values”? Is he appealing to such criteria as a Kantian a priori, or Sidgwick’s self-evident moral principles, or a supposedly incorrigible moral intuition or moral sense? I find this hard to believe, for I am quite sure that he is as well aware as I am that these criteria have proved cognitively unreliable. Is he asking us to discard the appeal to cognitive criteria altogether and yet to let them override the conditionally normative values which he seemingly admits are cognitively well sanctioned as far as they go? This strikes me as both unwise and absurd. As an empiricist I am free to state that a theory of value that cannot be supported in terms of hypotheses open to empirical factual confirmation is one for which there is no credible evidence at all. Moreover, I find that such empirically supported value theories do exist, and mine, based upon the descriptions of normatively functioning selective systems operating in human behavior, is one of these. So far as I can see, it covers the whole range of human values, including the moral. And it seems to me that the “overriding” normative action of natural selection under conditions of severe social pressure might go far to take care of a lack Margolis perhaps has felt in some traditional empirical theories of value.

NOTE

1. This hypothesis is developed in considerable detail in my *The Sources of Value* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), chap. 21, sec. 4, on “Lines of Legislation among Selected Values,” and succeeding sections, pp. 673–99; also in my *Ethics* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), chap. 13, on “The Social Adjustment Theory”; and again in my *Concept and Quality* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1967), chap. 15, on “Values.”