

A Definition of “Cultural Values”: be they American Indian or Euro-American

from Rodney Frey. *Eye Juggling: Seeing the World Through a Looking Glass and a Glass Pane* (A workbook for clarifying and interpreting values). University Press of America: Lanham, New York, London. 1994. pp. 19-24

Values can be defined as *learned, relatively enduring, emotionally charged, epistemologically grounded and represented moral conceptualizations that assist us in making judgements and in preparing us to act*. In other words, the priorities we set and the choices we make are significantly based upon the values we hold. This usage of the concept is inclusive of the personal values of an individual as well as the collective values of a community.

1. All values are *learned* values. Not unlike the acquisition of a particular language, values are transmitted and inculcated through an intricate web of societal agents and interactions. Primary to this web are family members and social peers, formal schooling, leisure, work and religious activities, and such rites of passage as baptism, confirmation and marriage. And interwoven throughout this web is the oral and/or written word, the stories of a people. The influence of this web is particularly important during childhood when the basic value parameters are established. In turn, these parameters help orient the subsequent acquisition and the reaffirmation of values throughout a person's life-span.

Because values are learned, they can be forgotten, and they can be learned anew, though usually only with great effort. But values can be changed. Humanity is neither innately predisposed to certain values; nor is the content of values genetically determined. My concern here is not to suggest how an individual forms his or her particular values. Furthermore, these comments are not meant to preclude the insights of such theorists as Noam Chomsky, Erik Erikson or Jean Piaget. The possibility that humans have certain biologically-based maturation levels and predispositions influencing the acquisition of language and personality must be considered in any discussion of the acquisition of values. Suffice it to say, the formation of an individual's value configuration is an extremely complex process.

2. Values are relatively *enduring*. Values are grounded in the cultural heritage of a society and pervasively housed within the institutions of the society, the web. And values are well established from childhood. An individual may decide to forego a particular value, only to be confronted by it at each juncture within the web of society and to be grounded by its parameters formed early in life. The values of a society or of an individual are not easily altered.

3. Values are *not* necessarily *consciously* known by either the individual or the society. Not unlike our everyday linguistic grammar, values are seldom overtly articulated, even though we depend upon both in comprehending another's action and in generating our own. Your search for your own values and the values of others is accomplished only with great effort.

4. Values tend toward *consistency*, i.e., like values attract like values. The assemblage of an individual's or of a community's values strives for affiliation, compatibility and integration

among those values. If a particular value is not consistent with the assemblage of values already held, it is not easily integrated and is often ignored and excluded.

This is not to suggest that we will always find consistency among the values held by any given individual or expressed in a given community. Values *strive* for consistency. The particular assemblage of values of an individual or community is typically inclusive of disparate and often mutually contradictory values. It may even be the case that a particular configuration of values not only accommodates but espouses seemingly contradictory values. At issue is not the inconsistent disposition of the individual values in question, but the overall structure of the relationships and the character of that integration among all those values. To understand any given value, one must also consider the larger gestalt in which it is embedded. Such a contradiction will be observed when we discuss the Crow Indian values of oneness and unity, and differentiation and uniqueness. The apparent inconsistency is dissolved when the specific contextual integration, in this instance, the imagery of the "circle" and "wagon wheel," is taken into consideration.

5. Values enshrine and impart a society's concepts of the *morally desirable*. Values set forth the social criteria for and the cultural assumptions upon which good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral, noble and vile are established. Values provide a code and form the basis for all moral judgments, whether directed at others, nature or the self. Values guide human conduct, providing a "road map" for action. Of course, what one may value as proper, another may value as immoral and improper. As a consequence, values are often at the focal point of conflict.

6. Values are inundated with *emotional* feelings and are held with strong conviction. There can be no passively neutral values. Fear, sympathy, hate, love, anger, passion, contempt: all are expressions of this subjective dimension of values. Values are most assuredly felt.

Because of this affective component, values are thus more than a code of conduct. By infusing judgements with passion, values establish the desirable. Good and bad are not simply laid out; "good" is passionately desired and "bad" is ardently avoided. Values are the great *motivators* within a society and the individual; the drive directed toward all sorts of ends. From how a "rich man" is defined to what is most "feared" in life: all are grounded in values. But it is also this passion that certainly can inhibit an appreciation of values different from one's own. Emotions can cloud a clear vision.

7. Values establish a *disposition to act*. Values influence our behaviors by preparing us to act in certain morally-oriented ways. When a certain behavioral response is called for in a given context of social interaction, what that behavior may be is based in part upon the values held. I suggest "in part" because values, while primary among those influences, are not the sole influence on our behaviors. Other influences include the level of individual self-esteem, social role definitions, societal laws, spontaneous collective behavior and the persuasiveness of others, for instance. Consequently, identified values alone are not necessarily accurate predictors of behavior. While they closely parallel one another, the values we hold and the behaviors we exhibit are not the reverse sides of the same coin, each synonymous with the other.

8. Any given value is based upon and expressed in terms of certain *epistemological criteria*. Upon what standard of knowing is a particular value acknowledged and represented? How is a particular value validated by the holder of that value? In what terms is a value framed and publicly presented? To assert, for example, that "wilderness is a vast, as yet untapped natural resource to be harvested" implies a value based upon and expressed in terms of epistemological criteria that is "economic" in nature. "Wilderness" is *known* in terms of a "commodity" that has "production value," and that can be distributed and consumed.

While there is a range of possible epistemological criteria on which values can be grounded, for our interpretative purposes, only three will be isolated: literal-denotative, metaphoric-connotative, and anagogic-implicative. This typology owes much to the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy 1934. Each epistemological criteria is to be understood as complementary to and not exclusive of the others, i.e., each is a "legitimate" path to knowledge. Each of us typically rely upon all three ways of knowing, though often emphasizing one mode over the others. How a people have come to know the world, in turn, influences a people view of that world, their ontology. While some cultures see themselves as a part of the world around them, others view themselves as fundamentally separate from a world "out there." In turn, knowledge may be either intuitively "received" from "agents" emanating in the world or empirically "discovered" thorough a rigorous application of human logic. As a result the significance and meaning of a "flower," a "rainbow" or for that matter, "reality" itself can differ radically and completely.

Because of its elemental importance, such epistemological differences will also resonate throughout and manifest themselves in each of the various topics considered during this course. In order for us to better appreciate the underlying distinctions between various religions, and understand them on their own terms, without imposing our values, approach each based upon their respective epistemologies.

Each way of knowing is understood as complementary to the others, and none are somehow "superior" or "true" compared to the others. No one criteria, in and of itself, is more appropriate or morally superior than another. Each category has validity, equally contributing to the human condition, although in differing ways. This is not a developmental sequence through which an individual progresses from one stage to the next.

Literal-denotative values are those which are promulgated on the *physical senses* and have *explicit*, literal meanings. The types of senses on which these values are based are those overtly acknowledged as viable and generally shared among a given group, e.g., sight and sound. These values are understood to be grounded on and have legitimacy because of something that has a reality in the experiential world.

Let me offer two examples of literal-denotative value statements that focus on "wilderness." "Wilderness is made up of a given number and type of trees, animals, plants, in a specified physical terrain." As referred to in the Old Testament, wilderness is a "desert" and "waste," a "cursed" land, full of "thorns and thistles." In both instances, the value statements are based on literal meanings, accessible through the senses. You can touch the trees and feel the thorns. The words descriptive of "wilderness" attempt to elicit precise, literal representations. The word "tree" has a more or less precise physical counterpart in the "wilderness." Empiricism and religious fundamentalism, for example, are associated with literal-denotative values.

Metaphoric-connotative values are those based on mental *conceptualization* and have *implicit*, metaphoric meanings. These values can range from the logically oriented, i.e., based on a consensus of shared rules for thinking, to the irrationally focused, i.e., formed without a consensus of shared rules for thinking and based upon fallacious assumptions. They are often predicated on and are legitimized because of a deduction from or a comparison to other values. They are not dependent upon being grounded in the experiential world. Metaphoric-connotative value statements offer more figurative and abstract images, often images of qualities, and are much less literal in their representations.

Let me illustrate this type of value with three different examples. "Wilderness is the antithesis of civilization." "Wilderness is a land of no use." "Wilderness is where the birds fly free and the beauty of the flowers glows with the colors of the rainbow." These particular wilderness value statements are deduced from and implicitly compared with other already held values, i.e., values of societal civilization, economic use and aesthetic beauty. They have little direct and no literal counterpart in an experiential "wilderness," but refer to images of abstract qualities. Rationalism, literary criticism and racial prejudice, for example, are all founded on metaphoric-connotative values.

Anagogic-implicative values are those which are derived from *intuitive* or *mystical* experiences and have *implicit*, metaphoric meanings. It is often the meaning of the "essence" within something overt and material, the "inner forms." While emanating out of and legitimized by an experience, unlike literal-denotative values, that experience is much more private and contemplative in nature, e.g., divine revelation, and not contingent upon certain senses that are generally shared by all in the community. Although this is not to suggest that in any given community all members could not have access to such an experience. Similar to metaphoric-connotative values, anagogic-implicative value statements offer figurative, abstract images, and meanings. But these are images that are normally hidden from humanity and often esoteric in nature, e.g., the image of an animal's soul.

An example of an anagogic-implicative value statement would be, "Wilderness is where God and all true wisdom are to be found." Another example would be, "The image in the stone is that of the seal, revealed through the stone by the seal to the stone carver as he sat in the great solitudes." Both statements offer figurative meanings, i.e., images of God and of a seal-spirit, and are derived from a mystical or intuitive ways of knowing. Anagogic-implicative values are not dependent upon empirical or logical processes. Artistic and religious inspiration, for example, is associated with anagogic-implicative values.

The ingrained values expressed throughout our stories form much of the basis for who and what we are. They help us to interpret and comprehend the behaviors of others as well as to guide our own behaviors through the maze of human existence.