

COLLECTIVE VALUES

On 16 March 2011, Rajav Shah (the head of USAID) presented his budget proposal to the House Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs. He argued that foreign assistance from USAID “keeps our country safe, develops the markets of tomorrow, and expresses our collective values.” While appeals to our collective values are often politically expedient, the content of such appeals is often ambiguous at best. Of course, collective values must be *values*, not mere common expectations or shared understandings of joint activities. They require treating activities, entities, or practices as worthwhile or essential to what we do together. Furthermore, collective values are not merely agent-neutral values; they must be grounded in *our* collective concern with activities such as the elimination of sex trafficking, the prevention of deforestation, and the promotion of education. But, while the authors of this entry value such things, and suspect that most other US citizens do as well, this does not mean that they are *American values*--values that are not just mine and yours, his and hers, but *ours*.

If the methodologically and ontologically individualistic assumption that *there are no collectivities* is true, then there are no collective values; rather, appeals to collective value are literally false, though often elliptical for true claims about aggregations of individual values. Perhaps the claim that “Justice is an American value” might be better paraphrased as “Every US citizen values justice”, or as “Most US citizens value justice.” Unfortunately, such paraphrases threaten to flatten an important distinction between *shared* and *collective* values, which can be exemplified in the difference between the members of an academic department who all happen to value good baseball games, and the department’s valuing of a specific deliberative procedure. The baseball-value could be kept private; but even when it is made public it does not have an impact on department-relevant behavior. The valuing of a deliberative procedure, by contrast, grounds the practices and projects of the department *as such*. So, while ‘shared values’ and ‘collective values’ are often treated as interchangeable, they are logically distinct. Collective and shared values are significant for understanding some collectivities. For example, someone who does not understand their near-religious exaltation of cheese curds and Usinger’s sausage may not really understand Wisconsinites. Moreover, shared and collective values are significant for decision-making, as when marketing to a particular demographic requires considering their shared values. However, the fact that people *happen to share a value* is unlikely to impact action in any way that extends beyond the action-guidance of individual values.

Of course, a more sophisticated form of methodological individualism might couple the individualistic requirement on explanation with a non-individualistic conception of *value* (e.g., Weber 1968, 18). The seeming paradox of this position dissipates with the recognition that networks of social practice can be seen as the structural scaffolding upon which individual values can be constructed, or as the holistic conceptual background against which individual practices of valuing can emerge. For example, valuing the vintage New England Patriots football logo requires the

existence of numerous social institutions (e.g., facts about national and local history, the existence of the National Football League, and fashion trends at the time of the American revolution). But, such a value is not a *collective* value; while social institutions are necessary to explain how such values are possible, the individual is still the locus of valuation and the locus of action.

In short, genuinely *collective values* require 1) a collective agent capable of goal-directed behavior, and 2) collective values that are implicated in, required for, or constitutive of that behavior. This does not require an ascription of value *to the collectivity*; and, some collective values are likely to be dependent upon, though not reducible to individual values. Such values arise where the social institutions that are a necessary condition for individual valuing are grounded in the collective nature of a joint activity. Call these “we-values” (to parallel “we-intentions”). Unlike values contingently shared by group members, we-values depend on a complex set of relationships that can modulate the ways in which individuals reflect upon these values, consider conflicting values, and recalibrate their individual and collective actions to accord with those values. Some we-values are analytically constitutive of the group itself (e.g., The Society for the Preservation of Greek Heritage must treat Greek culture as worthy of value); while other we-values achieve their status as a result of the necessity of the value for continuing a collective endeavor. For example, it is an essential part of belonging to the modern scientific community that one value seeking the truth, replicating results, and preserving methodological transparency (cf., Anderson 2004; Kitcher 2001).

These we-values may be relatively thick or relatively thin. A rabbit values her life because all of her actions accord with this value, and such relatively thin values thus offer a way of categorizing and describing her behavior. Similarly, we might say that a particular corporation values an increase in its profits because its actions accord with this value. Such ‘free-floating values’, however, are insufficient to explain the role of valuing in individual and collective deliberation. Agency in a thicker sense may well require reflecting on one’s values, considering how they interact and conflict, and attempting to bring one’s actions into accord with one’s values. Thick values, unlike their thin counterparts, provide structure for deliberations and play an integral role in practical reasoning.

This brings us to the most robust collective values, values that are properly predicated *of the collectivity itself* (Gilbert 2000). In such cases, *the collectivity* must be able to reflect on its values, consider how they interact and conflict, and evaluate the extent to which individual actions should be brought into accord with these values. For example, a university that has plans and projects designed to ensure that its actions (e.g. admissions and hiring decisions) increase diversity, and endeavors to alter its actions where they do not align with this value, can be properly said to value diversity.

Collective values provide action guidance that stretches well beyond the recognition of aggregates of individual values. They change the deontic status of particular actions for group members. While a new member of an academic department, for example, has no more reason to value fine wine after learning that her colleagues do so than she does when she learns that some lose aggregate of her friends do, when she learns that her colleagues value improving gender equality in her profession, she gains new reasons for action (and there is a chance that--as a member of this group--she will have to give up some reasons that she used to have). Of course, the fact that something is valued by a collectivity to which one belongs does not imply that such values ought not be changed or challenged, but as a group member such challenges are the exception, not the rule (Graham 2002, 123ff). Perhaps less obviously, collective values also can change the deontic significance of actions for non-members, making actions more egregiously wrong than they would be if merely shared by a random set of agents. For example, there is an additional reason to respect an artifact that is valued by a group for its role in their collective activities, history, or self-understanding that goes beyond the reason to respect a similar artifact that is valued by a similar number of disconnected individuals (c.f. Sistare *et. al* 2001). So, the fact that a value is collective rather than merely shared can be morally significant both for members and those external to a collectivity.

FURTHER READINGS

Anderson, E. (2004) *Value in ethics and economics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gilbert, M. (2000) *Sociality and responsibility*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Graham, K. (2002). *Practical reasoning in a social world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kitcher, P. (2001). *Science, truth, and democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sistare, C. et al. eds. (2001). *Groups and Group Rights*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.

Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and society* (Fishoff et al, Trans). Berkeley: University of California Press.