Value as a category: what Kant might have said
by Bob Stone

Intro
This talk consists of a quick summary of what Kant says about our view of the world, followed by a longer account of what he should have said. The latter account is backed up by various pieces of evidence from psychology and neuroscience, taking in nematodes, babies, brain-damaged adults and patients with severe depression. After linking that to various arguments about reason and emotion, I give a summary of five points I am contending.

Part 1: what Kant says
In principle, I agree with Hume that you can't derive an 'ought' from an 'is', or a value from a fact. If we simply describe the world as it is, from the point of view of an objective observer (the totally rational scientist), we do not include any notions of how things ought to be, or any notions of value, e.g. that this bit of the world is good and that bit bad, or this bit beautiful and that bit ugly. We may bring those concepts to bear on the world, but they are entirely subjective and we have to keep them firmly separate from our understanding of how things actually are.

In fact, says Kant, things are not quite that simple. When we experience the world, for one thing we perceive it through our senses, which determine which aspects of it we are aware of. For example we see surfaces as coloured when they reflect electromagnetic waves at certain frequencies, we hear noises when ripples are caused in the air or other medium, we smell and taste and feel certain things, but not others, when they have an impact on other sense organs. That much is fairly standard. Kant added the idea that we are hard-wired with *a priori* concepts with which to experience these perceptions. For example, we see the world out there as consisting of things, or 'substances', rather than, say, bundles of waves; most famously, we cannot help seeing all that happens out there as being part of a system of cause and effect and assuming that every event is caused. Even our idea that some events happen before other events, or at a distance from other events, is part of our hard-wired conceptual apparatus, not an absolute feature of the world out there. Other beings, Kant believes, might see the world in a totally different way. Within our conceptual structure, or that of other beings, we can have objective notions of what is true or false [empirical realism] but the structure itself is not objectively real [transcendental idealism]. That casts some doubt on the notion of an objective view of the world, a view from nowhere; but more of that later.

The other half of Kant's system is that of practical reason. To summarise it a bit waspishly, there are various things Kant wants to hang on to – like free will, morality, God – but which seem not to work in his theoretical system; so he develops another system, practical reason, in which we humans can be seen not only in the natural world dimension, where we are subject to the inexorable laws of cause and effect, but also in the parallel dimension of things in themselves, where we can reason about what to do and freely choose to be moral – which leads to a whole lot of stuff about God and immortality. Here's what I wish Kant had said instead.

Part 2: psychological and neuroscientific evidence
As well as the 12 categories he mentions, aka Pure Concepts of Understanding, with which we understand how things are, we are also endowed by nature – whether we like it or not – with concepts of value or meaning, which we apply to absolutely everything we perceive or think about, and which motivate us in everything we do in the world. Examples, not necessarily 12, would include such categories as desirability, scariness, fascination, usefulness, irritatingness . . . etc.

(a) There is a good deal of evidence of the pervasiveness of value in psychology. To take one rather extreme example: the disgust instinct. I recently heard a discussion about it at the Cheltenham Science Festival between Valerie Curtis (director at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical

Medicine), who calls herself a disgustologist, and Rachel McMullan, a noted expert on worms. Apparently nematodes instinctively keep away from areas on which experimenters have placed pathogens, things harmful to nematodes. As nematodes have 302 neurons (each), it is hard to believe that they *feel* disgust in a conscious, subjective sense, but there is a mechanism by which the pathogens trigger avoidance in their behaviour. The same seems true of animals in general, and the idea is that the disgust instinct in humans – which is triggered by such things as excrement, vomit etc – is an automatic response to things which probably contain pathogens which would harm us. The disgust can be reinforced by training, and – at least in the case of humans – modified by personal experience and cultural influence. The same applies to certain other negative feelings, fear directed towards potential dangers, for example, and of course positive feelings that we and all animals have, and cannot avoid, towards things such as food and sex. These are all instinctive attributions of value to things around us.

(b) To move up a rung in the evolutionary ladder from nematodes, experiments have been done on preverbal human infants, whose reactions are presumed to be natural rather than conditioned. For example, a study in Canada by Kiley Hamlin and others, in their wonderfully named 'baby lab'– which you can see discussed by her and others on a CBS news programme – shows that (a) 5-month-old infants consistently show a preference – by pointing to or touching approvingly – for individuals (puppets) whom they see doing helpful things, and (b) 8-month-olds, more sophisticatedly, "selectively prefer characters who act positively toward prosocial individuals and characters who act negatively toward antisocial individuals" (Hamlin 19931). Whether this proves that that there is a "universal moral core all humans share . . . as part of our biological nature", as one experimenter suggests, I'm not sure. Especially as they did another experiment in which 87% of the babies were shown to prefer puppets who punished those puppets that chose a different cereal from that which the baby chose – leading one experimenter to describe them as "little bigots"! Leaving aside the various interpretations one might give – egotism, moral intuition, empathy – we can see that the babies do go in for valuing something. Maybe they have unconsciously imbibed some values from their parents, maybe it is instinctive; but a sense of value is there, and it is prompting the babies to behave in a certain way.

(c) After nematodes and babies, let us extend the discussion to adults, who are studied by Antonio Damasio, a professor of neuroscience and psychology. His book *Descartes' Error* is a must-read.

As well as the innate preferences that any organism has, which Damasio calls its "biological value system" (181), each of us humans develops a whole network of acquired, or secondary, values as a result of our personal history, upbringing and culture. A trivial case is my feeling of disgust at the taste of whisky, which I used to enjoy – a change easily attributed to one event in 1976. More seriously, we develop our network of connected values, which means mostly positive and negative attitudes to things, as we interact with our parents and with other people in general; and these values can go on developing as long as we are alive. Different people often have opposing values, and we can argue about them.

A lot has been written, most famously by Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking Fast and Slow*, on the way our underlying, often unconscious, values (otherwise known as prejudices) can interfere with rational decision-making. When the decision is simply about a mathematical problem, any emotional input seems to be a mere hindrance, except that no one would ever bother to solve the problem if they didn't have either a strong curiosity to find the answer or the incentive of proving to themselves or others that they could solve it – clear examples of valuing something. But Damasio argues that decisions about what to do *depend* on our having emotional triggers from our value system as well as the ability to think logically.

He has studied, in particular, people who have suffered specific brain damage – in a part of the

frontal lobe – but whose memory, intelligence, and powers of logic and concentration are unimpaired. There are two things they can no longer do: one is to feel emotions, other than those basic instincts which are innate (the biological value system), the other is to make decisions. So a damaged patient will not show any feeling when confronted by a disturbing picture of the sort that causes distress to the control group of undamaged people (209). This is measured by skin conductance – i.e. how much you sweat (207-8); but it is also admitted by some patients themselves, who are aware that they do not feel the same acquired emotions that they remember feeling before the accident and know perfectly well what emotions they are 'supposed' to feel in accordance with the value system which they have acquired (211). And on the other side of the coin, the same type of patient will not be able to make even a simple decision about what to do next. An example is of a patient who was being offered by Damasio a choice of appointments (193-4): he was perfectly capable of explaining the pros and cons of each date, but incapable of choosing between them in a finite time, in the way healthy people would, and insensitive both to the likely impatience of the psychiatrist and to the embarrassment most would feel about wasting so much time. Imagine such a person trying to work out how to cope with some social situation or which job to apply for, let alone which way to vote in the Referendum. People with that type of brain damage, though apparently quite normal, simply cannot cope with life. So there seems to be a connection between the loss of acquired emotional responses and inability to make decisions – paradoxical at first sight, as emotions might be thought to get in the way of rational decision-making rather than to facilitate it.

What happens, Damasio argues, is that various 'somatic markers', as he calls them (173), intervene in the decision-making process, either consciously or unconsciously. That means a feeling of either positive or negative reaction to various items that occur to you as you ponder the decision. Such markers, or triggers, *do* occur in the brain-damaged patients if the positive or negative attitude is instinctive: they will still run away fast if chased by a lion. But if the attitudes have formed during their life, and so depend on the frontal lobe to be triggered, they do not come into play as emotional triggers to affect a decision – even though the patient remembers perfectly well what attitudes he acquired before the brain damage. For example, do I take a break from writing this talk to visit New Road and watch the cricket? As various thoughts occur to me – the comfort of this chair (negative towards moving), the effort of walking a mile and a half (negative), the pleasure of watching cricket (positive), the desire to get this damn thing finished and stop worrying about it (negative) – the negative markers outweigh the positive, which is really what constitutes the decision, and I decide within a few seconds to carry on writing. Without those somatic markers, i.e. triggers from acquired values, I would still be sitting at my desk now, listing all the pros and cons, unable to decide, stuck on about four lines ago!

So values – a whole host of positive or negative feelings about various thoughts that occur to one, some innate, others acquired during one's life – are not an irrelevant, or consistently bad, accompaniment to the rational side of decision-making, but appear to be an absolutely vital part of it. If you lose the feelings triggered by them, no amount of reasoning will produce a decision.

(d) But what about the time when we are not making decisions, if indeed there is any such time during our waking hours? Let me tell you about *The Phenomenology of Existential Feeling* – a frightening-sounding title, but in fact a very enlightening article by Matthew Ratcliffe, whose arguments are based not on neuroscience this time, but on phenomenology, i.e. what it feels like from the inside. Some of his ideas come from Husserl and Heidegger; his evidence is taken mostly from psychiatric patients, usually those with severe depression.

He argues that, in addition to the obvious emotions that we all feel – viz. so-called 'intentional' emotions directed at particular situations, such as natural fear of the lion about to pounce or an acquired fury at a misplaced apostrophe – we also have a background set of feelings, or 'existential

feelings' (1), that we are hardly aware of until they disappear. When we see things, we automatically see them as having possibilities. Husserl's example is of seeing a cup (7), where we see only one side but sense the possibility of seeing the other side, of our picking it up, of someone else's picking it up. A patient with severe depression can lose all that, and find the world loses its feeling of tangibility and therefore reality (11). More generally, we perceive things as *mattering* in some way (9): something may be threatening, or desirable, or useful, or comforting, or irrelevant to what we intend to do. Here again the experience of depressed patients is illuminating. That whole sense of meaning can disappear, with the result that everything in the world seems to have no significance, good or bad, whatsoever. That does not mean that the patient thinks, "Oh good, at last I can take an objective view of things"! It leads to utter despair. Here is what one schizophrenic patient said about the experience of emerging from depression for a short time (13):

> When we were outside I realised that my perception of things had completely changed. Instead of infinite space, unreal, where everything was cut off, naked and isolated, I saw Reality, marvellous Reality, for the first time. The people whom we encountered were no longer automatons, phantoms, revolving around, gesticulating without meaning; they were men and women with their own individual characteristics, their own individuality. It was the same with things. They were useful things, having sense, capable of giving me pleasure. Here was an automobile to take me to the hospital, cushions I could rest on. [. . .] For the first time I dared to handle the chairs, to change the arrangement of the furniture. What an unknown joy, to have an influence on things; to do with them what I liked and especially to have the pleasure of wanting the change.

What this girl had lost was not any particular emotional response, or the attribution of a particular meaning or value to a thing or to things in general, but the ability to see everything as possessing meaning and value – whether good or bad. And it is that existential or background feeling which those who are not depressed have all the time, without really being aware of it. It is the automatic predisposition to attribute some kind of meaning and value to everything.

Part 3: reason and emotion

Let's put all this stuff back into the philosophical framework with which I started. There is a classic, or old-fashioned, view that my real self, the controller, Descartes' disembodied 'moi', Kant's thing-in-itself, is my reason. In an ideal world I would act on reason alone, undistracted by any emotions or feelings, or what Kant calls 'heteronomous' inclinations. I would work out not only how to get from A to B by reasoning, but also which B to aim for. The more modern view is that I – my real self – am an ever-changing combination of all the things that have produced me up to this moment, and decisions I make are made by the whole product. This is not an unfortunate lapse from the ideal, but absolutely necessary, both psychologically – as I've been arguing in this talk – and logically, as David Hume pointed out when he says in his *Treatise* that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will" (p. 460) and that reason alone is merely the "slave of the passions" (p. 462).

Let me dwell now on the logical aspect. How, for example, do I reason what end to aim for if I do not already have a more ultimate end from which to derive it? How do I reason how to attribute positive value to something unless there is already something else of positive value from which its value is derived? How do I reason my way to a categorical imperative? On that last question, it seems to me that Kant gives a very neat encapsulation of what we mean when we use the word 'moral' – "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (4:421) – but he does not even begin to show why we should bother. Motivation must come from some 'passion' (Hume's word), i.e. emotion or feeling, the attribution of positive or negative value to a thing or action, that is either inborn or acquired by

upbringing. The idea that we can attribute value by reason alone seems to me impossible, as I suggested earlier; the 'reason' could only involve deriving it from some more ultimate value or feeling, and that in turn would need to be derived from a more ultimate one . . . *ad infinitum*. That does not mean that there is no room for logic and argument in the area of values. When people argue about their values, they may try to show that their opponent's attitudes are inconsistent with each other, or assume beliefs which are not in fact true; just occasionally the opponent may be persuaded to adapt his attitude to take account of those objections. As with decision-making, the formation of values includes a combination of reason and feeling; reason alone is not enough. Possibly, for value-formation, feeling alone might be, but not for an intelligent person.

Conclusion

To summarise, the mutual dependence of reason and emotion in our understanding of the psychology of decision-making and of value-forming, has inevitable consequences for the traditional separation between seeing the world as it is, albeit through Kant's categories of understanding, and attributing value to things in it. If I am right, all of us (apart from the severely depressed) see the world not as an impersonal collection of objects to be observed dispassionately, but as a collection of things that already have value attached to them, by each one of us, and in which (if we have undamaged brains) we already have the urge to act in a way that is aroused by those evaluations.

I am not certain to what extent such values *have to* play a part in something like physics, where we study totally non-conscious stuff, and it may make sense for physicists to attempt to eliminate all value from their thinking – except of course that a physicist is a physicist only because she finds the subject-matter of physics utterly fascinating, which is a matter of value. But when we think about the world as a place to *be in* and *react with*, we simply cannot see it 'from nowhere', dispassionately. The values are there in it. The values we attach to what we perceive or think about are not a detachable part of the world we experience.

Epilogue

A final example. A friend of mine told me she was writing a piece on 'feminist epistemology'. I smiled inwardly, wondering what difference there could possibly be between epistemology done by a man and by a woman. But when I got home I looked up 'feminist epistemology' on the SEP and found (as I should have realised) that the field is by no means devoid of interest. One point especially made me think. In the area of social sciences, some academics try to analyse what's going on objectively, taking the 'view from nowhere', whereas feminists may prefer to take a subjective viewpoint from the emotional position of one class or group of people involved. Surely that is wrong? No, say the feminists; the passion for an objective, view-from-nowhere stance is nothing more than a male prejudice! If we think we can stand outside our values, we deceive ourselves.

Summary

To summarise the 5 contentions I am pushing:

1. Our view of the world we are in is shot through with value, whether we like it or not.
2. A value-free perspective on the world, as if from nowhere, is probably impossible.
3. These values are either instinctive or acquired during life by interaction with other people.
4. They are not logically deducible – though we may adjust our values if we find they are logically incompatible with each other or that they assume beliefs in matters of fact which we find are not true.
5. Simple awareness of our value system is not enough to produce any decision. We need an emotional trigger from a value to nudge us one way or the other.

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