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A STRATIFIED THEORY OF VALUE

abstract

Contemporary reflection on the concept of value oscillates between positions that advocate absolutist realism and positions that propose total relativism. The present paper aims to distance itself from these two ways of reading the topic, rejecting any monolithic conception, and proposing a stratified theory of value. Beginning with an analysis of values that differentiates them from both "goods" and "valuations," the author outlines an understanding of value that must be investigated in its multiple, interconnected layers. The stratification starts from the role of the emotional sphere and comes down to a formal and absolute conception of the concept. The goal of the paper is to outline the different levels of validity of each proposed layer, which must be recognized and differentiated, with the aim of also capturing the difficulties and ambiguities that characterize the transition from one level to another.

keywords

values, stratified theory of value, goods, valuations, tertiary qualities

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Contemporary reflection on the concept of value oscillates between an ungrounded realism that conceals an implicit or explicit reference to religious faith on the one hand, and a subjectivism that quickly leads to relativism on the other. However, the attempt to overcome these two ways of reading value encounters numerous obstacles, to the point that some critics claim that value should be relegated to sociological, historical or psychological analysis, but can hardly be grounded in a philosophy that wants to call itself rigorous.
It cannot be denied that reflection on value has always been characterised by great conceptual difficulty. Indeed, the term is used with very different meanings and its semantic field tends to constantly widen or shift even in investigations that attempt to address it analytically. In the following pages, I will begin by outlining some differences within the conceptual nebula of 'value', separating *values* as such from two closely related concepts: 'goods' and 'valuations'. Next, I will look into how we relate to values. Finally, my goal will be to outline a stratified theory of value that allows for different levels of validity to be recognised. Stratification will also help to understand this concept through the difficulties and ambiguities involved in moving from one level to another.

1. The Economic Origin of 'Value'

Since its origin, the concept of 'value' has been linked to the economic sphere, as rendered by the late Latin form *valor*; in particular, this term indicates the appreciation of a good by a person using it. Over time, appreciation has lost its exclusively economic meaning to refer also to other spheres such as moral dignity or beauty; yet this does not detract from the original and fundamental connection between valuable and useful. The term 'value' was thus born with a strong economic imprint. It is no coincidence that, even at the beginning of the 20th century, many philosophical dictionaries did not contain the entry 'value' – the latter, though, was always present in economic ones.[1]
In its substantive meaning, the concept thus established itself relatively late in the philosophical debate and originated first and foremost in the 19th-century revival of the Kantian distinction between being and ought, which was translated into an autonomous reflection on 'being of value'. Reflecting on what is valuable means reflecting on a reality that does not end in the physical, natural, quantitative world; as a consequence of this shift,

1 Cf. e.g. the *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'Économie Politique*, edited by Léon Say and published between 1889 and 1892.

in the early 20th century, the need was felt to introduce the term *axiology*,[2] deriving from the Greek *axios* (valiant, worthy), as a synonym for 'general theory of values'. From this perspective, it is clear that the first philosophical reflections on the concept of value contained no identification between value and moral reflection. On the contrary, the values under investigation also included truth, beauty or happiness (Rickert, 1921).

2. Goods, Valuations and Values

The specificity of the modern concept of value, therefore, lies precisely in the fact that it has taken on an autonomous meaning with respect to both the real thing being appreciated and the subjective act of appreciation. The moment one begins to speak of value as the 'being valid' (cf. Lotze, 1874) of reality, one seeks to differentiate the validity of something from the something in question. We thus begin to understand the first fundamental distinction, that between values and actual 'goods'. In fact, the concept of value cannot be identified with an existing object; this can be defined as a good, i.e. an existing object that *has* a value, but *is not* a value.

As von Wright argued by highlighting a linguistic misunderstanding dense with substantial consequences: "as a joke, I would like to found a worldwide 'purist' movement whose aim would be to eliminate the term 'value' from current usage whenever it is meant to denote 'goods'" (von Wright, 2003, p. 14). It is clear that there is a strong connection between goods and values, but a complete identification between the two terms is impossible. If a certain theorem is true, it does not mean that it can be identified with truth as such, in the same way that if a painting is beautiful, it does not mean that it can be identified with beauty in general. Truth or beauty are values, and as such can never find full realisation in any real object (or event).

If we then turn to the ethical dimension, identifying value with any one good would risk subordinating a person's moral nature to the relationship between their nature and a world of goods posited as real. Doing so would base ethics on historical experience, thus leaving room for ethical relativism, and making any form of critique of the existing world of goods impossible (cf. De Monticelli, 2021, pp. 210ff.).

But, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, value cannot be equated with the act of the subject taking a position on value, i.e., with valuation. Indeed, values should never be confused with subjective acts of valuation: although values are always connected with valuations, they can never be *identified* with them (cf. Rickert, 1910/1999a, p. 12). Valuations are processes linked to a person's individual psyche, whereas value has a validity that is independent of the individual psychic process. Returning to the example of a theorem, its truth value is independent of the psychic process by which individual subjects think or do not think about it.[3]

In this regard, the topic of value was part of the late 19th- and early 20th-century debate between logicists and psychologists, which boils down to the problem of the relationship between valid logical laws and subjectivity (cf. Lask, 1911). If a theorem or a logical law (such as, for example, the principle of noncontradiction) is only valid in relation to the individual subject that enunciates it, it becomes the product of a human psyche with its individual characteristics. This, of course, opens the door to scepticism and relativism. A psychologist commits a category error if they mistake a *genetic* analysis of the way a notion is psychologically formed, or a *description* of what happens in the mind of the person who

2 Early writings in which this expression is found include: Lapie, 1902; von Hartmann, 1908; Urban, 1909.

3 In this perspective, granting validity to the theoretical value of a theorem does not mean asserting that such validity is recognised. A value can have validity without any act of valuation that takes a position with regard to it.

thinks of this notion, with the *objective* content of this notion (cf. Engel, 2014).[4] Clearly, individual valuation depends on psychological facts, whereas the validity or value of thoughts or actions is not psychological. If one claims that validity coincides with the content of mental representations, this is called psychologism.

A philosophical reflection on values must therefore be neither a 'philosophy of the subjective act of valuation', which risks turning into psychologism, nor a 'philosophy of goods', which risks being a mere cultural-historical investigation, a simple collection of significant objects or events. If psychologism confuses values and individual valuations, historicism equates value with the object of value (or good). Both positions fail to provide an adequate answer to the problem of relativism, by reducing value to its subjective dimension: "it is undisputed that there is a danger of being caught between the rock of psychologism and the hard place of historicism, which is itself a bad subjectivism" (Rickert, 1910/1999a, p. 17).[5]

If, therefore, an adequate reflection on value must conceptually distinguish between goods, valuations and values, it is nevertheless evident that one cannot consider the concept without keeping in mind the relationship that value entertains with the object of value (good) on the one hand and with the subjective process of appreciation or rejection (valuation) on the other. Not least because values have no other way of being present in the real world than through valuations and goods.

In particular, the relationship between valuation and value still requires more specific investigation. In fact, the correlation between ideal objects "of the purely logical sphere and *subjectively psychic lived experiencing as forming activity*" (Husserl, 1977, p. 18) is what allows us to focus on a further aspect of the concept of value: its claim to absolute validity. It is clear that the validity of value maintains some connection with the act of valuation. If one claims that value has autonomous and absolute validity, it raises questions about what this entirely subject-independent validity is.

3. Facts and Values

The distinction I have dwelt on between valuations and values is not universally accepted. On the contrary, reference is often made to Hume, or rather to what is known as 'Hume's law', to highlight a problem connected to the distinction proposed so far. Indeed, if we recognise that it is impossible to derive *ought* from *being* – i.e. if we maintain that when a judgement describes a situation of fact (being), it is not possible to derive from it any other judgement as to how that given situation ought to be – then value is inevitably identified with valuation.

From this viewpoint, value judgements are, in fact, always subjective assessments that depend on individual and psychologically connoted perspectives which cannot refer to any independent objectivity. If one takes this stance, considering values as different from evaluations generates a serious error because, as Ayer noted, moral or aesthetic judgements do not express cognition, but rather a positive or negative feeling – a positive or negative valuation – about something: 'x is good' or 'x is beautiful' is equivalent to 'hooray for x' (cf. Ayer, 1936).

Those who take this perspective rule out that truth can be understood as a value. On the contrary, the world of science and truth is the world of facts that are empirically ascertainable. Instead – and this is an immediate consequence of the identification of value with valuation – everything that concerns morality or aesthetics cannot be the object of cognition:

4 While it is clear that the existence of thoughts depends on psychological facts, what is not psychological is the *content* of thoughts. A psychologist position claims that the content of thoughts or logical laws coincides with the content of mental representations. This would be the case, for example, if one were to claim that the rules of a game (say, chess) are exclusively identified with the players' psychic processes.

5 On this topic see also Husserl (1911).

one's feelings on various issues cannot be evaluated in terms of 'correctness' (Rachels, 1991, p. 432). From this assertion derives the dichotomy between 'facts' and 'values' whereby facts, connected to being and reality, are opposed to values, connected to ought, which by definition is not yet, i.e. is not real.
The outcry against the separation of valuations and values brought about by Hume's law reveals a very important question that has so far remained in the background. How do we relate to values if we do not want to consider them either real goods or – as emotivists do – mere subjective valuations? Doesn't supporting the distinction between valuations and values expose any theory that upholds it to a form of naturalistic fallacy? In order to maintain the distinction between values and valuations, we need to be able to clarify how we relate to values, how we know them, and what kind of properties they have. If we were unable to answer these questions, reflections on value would be reduced to a mysterious epistemology and an 'absurd' ontology.
However, the position of those who identify values and valuations by claiming the impossibility of a rigorous philosophical reflection on value suffers from adherence to an anthropological model that – as I shall try to demonstrate – actually sanctions its untenability. The model of cognition to which it appeals, in fact, is strongly rooted within a conception that separates the rational and emotional dimensions. This model describes the human being as split: on the one hand there are the intellect and reason, whereby we know the truth of facts, and on the other there is the emotional sphere, whereby we make assessments of the world based on individual preferences but cannot produce any form of knowledge. One must start from the critique of this framework to outline a new theory of value.

4. Sense and Sensibility

If it is true that we grasp values through our capacity to feel emotions, it is also true that emotions have their own cognitive bearing, are an integral part of the knowledge process and open up certain aspects of reality for us. If we move away from the reason-vs-emotion dichotomy and manage to envision the relationship between the emotional and rational dimensions in terms of connection and system, we will be able to recognise that our emotions are the only way we know and understand certain aspects of reality.
Of course, there are various strategies for overcoming this opposition. There is the Husserlian attempt to recognise 'forms and norms' of reason even in the emotional sphere, traditionally considered irrational (Husserl, 1914; 20/24).[6] Or one can try to delineate a primacy of practical reason that grounds cognition itself in a feeling of evidence (Rickert, 1904-1909, p. 22). Or else one can acknowledge, as pragmatists do, that factual judgements themselves, including those proper to the natural sciences, are intertwined with value judgements. All of modern science is peppered with examples of theories that have been established at the expense of other (even predictively equivalent) ones on the basis of consistency, simplicity or elegance (Putnam, 2002, p. 141)
The enormous amount of research over the last thirty years on the role of the emotional dimension in rational analysis confirms the hypothesis that the instinctive and emotional realm – understood as a whole – must be considered an integral part of the rational analysis process. Beginning at least with the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the relevance of visceral emotions in the cognitive and decision-making process, including the most bluntly

6 Husserl (2004, pp. 147-8) clarifies what he means by stating: "Human practical behaviour is manifestly determined by feeling. If we sought to eliminate all feeling from the human soul, then all ethical concepts, concepts such as end and means, good and bad, virtue and obligation, and all the related particular concepts would lose their purpose. Man would no longer be a being who tends towards something, who wants, who acts".

'rational' kind, has been generally acknowledged (cf. Damasio, 1994). When we have to deal with complex problems, with multiple personal and social implications, past experiences that have left (not necessarily conscious) traces in us affect our choices, calling up emotions and feelings with negative or positive connotations.[7] In this way, feelings mark the available options in different ways.

But claiming that the emotional dimension is a source of knowledge is not the same as claiming that it is also a guarantor of the *validity* of knowledge or valuation, be it ethical or aesthetic – let alone scientific. This emotional knowledge cannot in itself be considered a source of normativity: rather, it opens up a new object field,[8] on which we must be able to reflect, while rationally broadening its scope. In this sense, it is necessary to posit that our ability to reason does not only have to reckon with the data of sensible perception as Kant maintained. Rather, in order to understand and know the human world – our *Umwelt* – we must take into account that we *do not perceive things neutrally*. On the contrary, we perceive things as frightening, cheerful or sad, precisely because our way of being in the world is emotionally connoted.

However, it is then reason – which gets its material form emotions as well as the senses and the intellect – that must distinguish the true from the false and the just from the unjust. In this sense, it can be argued that there is a need for a critical investigation of emotional reason: just like the senses, emotions can expose us to semblance and illusion. The task of reason – understood as embodied, limited and vulnerable – is to look for the conditions of possibility of rational action. As Kant posited, reason ought to be aware that human beings, as finite and limited, are prone to error and capable of arrogance and presumption. Still, human reason is also able to engage other subjects and reach justifications of a public character: that is, made in such a way that they can be exchanged with others.

5. For a Stratified Theory of Value

5.1 Minimal Value and Quality

This idea of reason being intertwined with and dependent on the emotional dimension, but at the same time capable of autonomous judgement, is the hypothesis underlying a 'stratified theory of value'. The first level that needs discussing as part of this theory is that of our immediate relationship with the world, linked to perception. If we dwell on the way we relate to the world, it becomes clear that for us most things are not connoted in a neutral and aseptic way,[9] but seem interesting, annoying, beautiful, ugly, frightening, sad or cheerful. The world turns out to be qualitatively connoted and it is precisely on the concept of quality that we must now pause.

It was mainly Gestalt thinkers (cf. Arnheim, 1949) who defined the emotional components of our perceptions as 'tertiary qualities'. Primary qualities, as Galileo (1953, pp. 311ff.) argued, are hardness, weight, shape, size, and motion; these are properties that an object possesses independently of the observing subject. On the contrary, secondary qualities are those that arise from the relationship between the primary qualities and a subject endowed with some

7 This is the 'somatic marker' hypothesis, according to which pleasant or unpleasant signals ('markers') are activated in us at a bodily level ('somatics') when we are faced with decision-making situations. These are bodily sensations that allow us to somewhat anticipate what we will feel when we experience the consequences of our choices. According to Damasio, the subjects studied that were deprived of the emotional dimension seemed able to 'know' but not 'feel' (Damasio, 1994, p. 85) and this made them unable to choose.

8 In the first volume of *Ideas*, Husserl clarified that even the acts of feeling and will "are *'objectivating,' 'constituting' objects originaliter* <and therefore> necessary sources of different regions of being and their respective ontologies" (Husserl, 1963, p. 282).

9 From this perspective it is necessary to step back from Kant's assertion that "intuitions without concepts are blind". If Kant were right, we would be forced to think that the immediate is exclusively sensible and that thought *creates* elements of sense out of sensible perception (Rickert, 1924/1939, pp. 73ff.).

form of sensory apparatus. These qualities are secondary because they vary according to the varying states of the observer: they include colour, taste, smell, etc. For example, colours disappear if there is no light, and tastes change if one is ill.

Finally, when we speak of tertiary or figural qualities, we are referring to something that, although located in the perceived object, involves the perceiving subject to an even greater extent. If secondary qualities already seem to be less objective than primary ones, because they can change according to our perceptual capacities, "it is not very easy" in the case of tertiary qualities "to define their nature and find their bases" (Bozzi, 1998, p. 100). Tertiary or Gestalt qualities (*Gestaltqualitäten*) are units made up of elements that can be separated from one another and that are not exhausted in their sum, just as a melody is not merely the sum of its notes. The complex of presentations necessary for the occurrence of Gestalt qualities constitutes their foundation (Ehrenfels, 1890/1988, p. 93). The representational content of a Gestalt quality, while depending on its foundation, is distinct and distinguishable from it. If Wertheimer had said that "black is gloomy even before being black" (cf. Parovel, 2012, p. 13), the Italian Gestaltist Paolo Bozzi gives a series of examples ranging from the vividness of the colour red, to the distressing nature of the diminished seventh chord, to the terror of a captive parrot in front of a lobster's claws (Bozzi, 1998).

Now, as Max Scheler argued, we are able to pick up on the cheerfulness of a party even if we are in a bad mood ourselves: the quality is there and in some cases the outward merriment can infect us (Scheler, 1923, p. 26) or make our bad mood worse. A tertiary quality "cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy" (Gibson, 1986, p. 129).[10]

Sensory perception is loaded with 'qualities'. And qualities are not just 'weight', 'movement', 'colour', 'taste', etc. Our senses are constantly stimulated, we are always hearing noises, perceiving smells, seeing lights and shadows that clearly convey a further 'quality', something that cannot be immediately ascribed to the sense domain it belongs to: the sound of sirens or horns and flashing lights convey distress, fear or anxiety (Rickert, 1923), while soft music and dim light can be relaxing and calming. Indeed, if there were no such qualities, we would be unable to understand what Woody Allen meant when he famously said that listening to Wagner makes one want to invade Poland.[11] In other words, it is a question of recognising that our immediate relationship with the world is made up of things that are colourful and noisy, but also frightening or sad, happy or distressing. On the basis of this acknowledgement, we can admit that the cheerfulness of a melody or the distressing nature of an ambulance siren are just as much a part of reality as colours and flavours, although in a different way (cf. De Monticelli, 2021, pp. 225ff.).

These 'qualities' bring subjectivity into play, but cannot be considered 'subjective' in the sense of a radical viewpoint relativism. These qualities are not relative to my personal history, unlike the halo of melancholy surrounding a photo of *my* grandmother. The latter is a subjective experience linked to me as an individual different from everyone else. In the case of tertiary qualities, it is very useful to distinguish – following Nicolai Hartmann – between 'relationality' and 'relativity'. The cheerfulness of a musical composition or the sadness of a landscape are such *for* a subject and only make sense when placed in relation to a subject: only a subject can recognise these characteristics. By this 'for' I do not mean that the subject gives those

10 The American psychologist James J. Gibson has taken up the topic of the 'invitation character' (*Aufforderungscharakter*) of reality from the Gestalt tradition, introducing the concept of 'affordances' of the environment. See in particular Gibson (1986, p. 102ff.).

11 In *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), Woody Allen excuses himself to Diane Keaton for wanting to leave the opera early: "I just can't listen to any more Wagner, you know...I'm starting to get the urge to conquer Poland".

things meaning or content, but rather that the subject is the reference point of the relation (Hartmann, 2002/2004). This is why we speak of 'relationality'. It is sufficient to think that even geometric laws are only valid 'for' spatial representations, and physiological or biological laws only 'for' organisms. Yet there is nothing worrying about this 'for', nor is this 'for' intended to imply a relativity of the content of such laws (Hartmann, 2002/2004, chap. XV). Rather, it is a matter of recognising different regional ontologies (Husserl, 1913/1963), from which to derive different norms and forms of validity.

Therefore, tertiary qualities are not relative to the individual subject, but rather depend on the subject's mode of being. In this sense, the investigation of tertiary qualities requires a rethinking of the structures of subjectivity. The cheerfulness of a melody and the gloominess of a landscape are experiences that carry meaning, but they are linked to a feeling, which involves the immediate relationship with the world, the body and the emotional dimension (Donise, 2019). Subjectivity should then be reconsidered in connection with biological and neurological knowledge that leans towards affirming the rights of instinct and emotion, showing how 'tertiary qualities' can be understood as adaptive responses to certain kinds of stimuli (e.g. certain sounds, such as a bear growling, can instinctively generate fear, without the bear ever having been experienced).[12] However, the analysis carried out in these pages is aimed at investigating tertiary qualities in their objective dimension of meaning, outlining their fundamental characteristics without reducing this dimension to an adaptive and instinctive response.

At this point, however, we must ask what is the connection between this qualitative dimension and the topic of validity. That is, we need to address the question of whether this non-sensible conveyed in sensory perception is the bearer of validity. A man's facial expression appears sad to me; I am drawn to a melody; a siren screaming through the city streets scares me. Can I be certain that the man is really sad, that the melody is beautiful and that the siren is frightening? And if so, how do I move from recognising the serenity or joy that a sound conveys to me to affirming its artistic value? What underlies the validity of such a transition? The recognition of meaning is not a psychological act, nor is it an intentional bestowal of meaning; rather, it is the acknowledgment of something that is independent of the states of an individual at a given moment, and is therefore potentially endowed with universal validity. Of course, some qualitative elements have greater universal validity (some sounds, such as sirens or screams, trigger a sense of alarm in every culture; others, such as the slow, sweet sounds of lullabies, tend to provoke a form of relaxation, and so on), while the validity for others is far less universal. In this sense, while we cannot establish universal validity, we must recognise that along with the merely quantitative, we grasp an element of qualitative meaning that exceeds and grounds our immediate relationship with the world. Before the distinction between facts and values, there is the encounter with an immediate world and the recognition of meaning.

This way, to conclude, we can try to formulate a hypothesis on the origin of the very concept of 'value'. Our encounter with the world, from the very beginning, is not neutral, nor is it geared towards cognition (neither scientific nor historical): we always like or dislike things, animals and people; they make us afraid, sad, happy. This element precedes any possible gnoseological relationship and offers an important indication that outlines

12 Damasio, for example, identifies primary and universal emotions as the adaptive responses to certain categories of stimuli. Nobody has an innate fear of bears or lions, yet we may be "wired to respond with an emotion, in preorganized fashion, when certain features of stimuli in the world (...) are perceived. Examples of such features include size (as in large animals); large span (as in flying eagles); type of motion (as in reptiles); certain sounds (such as growling)" (Damasio, 1994, ch.7.).

a relationship between facts and values. We can thus identify a moment in which the two elements – although identifiable in their differences – are united in a single perceptual experience.
In this sense we can recognize that 'values', at least in this minimal sense, are no less a part of reality than colours and tastes. In conclusion, this first level consists of an original and immediate layer, in which reality is characterised by having an emotional quality and a meaning of its own that are imposed on us; this is a fragmentary meaning and a 'minimal value'.

5.2 Subjective and Individual Value

The second level, which falls within an empirical horizon, has to do with the subjective, partial and culturally connoted viewpoints we find in time and space. This is the value referred to in the personal valuation that everyone has of things. Precisely because it is our own, we are inclined to consider this assessment as fully valid. We can therefore define this second-level type 'subjective validity'.

5.3. Epistemological Value

The third level is that of value based on which a scientist or historian selects relevant events, which implies the recognition of the significance of one event over another. Such values are established as shared and aspire to be universal. Every form of scientific knowledge is the "the working out and recasting of what is factual on the basis of specific governing perspectives" (Rickert, 1986, p. 195; see also Weber, 1904). There is a clear difference between the certainty expressed by natural-scientific knowledge and that which characterises the historical and cultural world. In the case of historical knowledge, the role of value in selecting relevant facts is more evident. A historian can never confine themselves to narrating "what really happened" but must always "distinguish the essential from the inessential": "that Friedrich Wilhelm IV declined the German imperial crown is a 'historical' event, but the question of which tailors made his uniforms remains a matter of complete indifference" (Rickert, 1986, pp. 71-72).
What should guide a historian in the selection of events is a 'general value', recognised by all. The selection should not entail a moral or ideological assessment of the historical event or individual, but rather the recognition of the relationship between value and event. A democrat on the one hand and an aristocrat on the other would very rarely agree in their evaluations of events; however, "differences in evaluation must be based on a *common conception of reality*. If such a *common* conception of reality did not obtain [...] the antagonists would not even be talking about the same thing" (Rickert, 1986, p. 92).
In other words, a distinction must be made between the personal valuation we express on an event (attributable to subjective and individual value) and the recognition of the objective relevance of an event. In this second case, one is aware of the *significance* of an event, where significance expresses the event's relation to value and makes it worthy of being selected.
Of course, meaningfulness is also partly related to the given era and cultural perspective. However, this level aspires to intersubjective validity: it seeks to rise above individual arbitrariness, as the result of a comparison between individual points of view. In the ethical sphere, too, this level of value aspires to construct reasons for justification that have a public character, in such a way that they can be the subject of discussion with others.

5.4. Absolute Value

The fourth level originates from all three previous ones and is configured – Lotze's reflections on the concept of *Geltung* help us here – as a formal concept of value, referring to things such as truth, beauty, justice and, following some early 20th-century authors, the value of sacredness, society, happiness or eroticism. This level allows us to identify the various spheres of values and work analytically on their differences. Thanks to it, we can recognise that in every age and in every place, people have acknowledged that some things are true, some things are beautiful and some things are right, etc.

At this level of the stratified theory, we are not interested in the content, which can be extremely varied. At this level – built precisely in the sense of regional ontologies – one can, for example, outline the differences between the logical-theoretical and other fields, to understand the difference between the validity of truth and the validity of beauty or goodness. Take, for example, any scientific goal – from a theorem to vaccines, from DNA to atomic energy. Every milestone can always be surpassed and is a part of an infinite process that can never exhaust the very material of 'truth'. On the other hand, in the artistic dimension, a single work of art always realises beauty in a form that cannot be surpassed, because it is complete in itself: it would make no sense to say that *The Magic Mountain* surpasses or completes *The Divine Comedy*.

This kind of formal investigation is essential for the adequate definition of concepts. And while it is clear that the contents of historical development are in constant transformation, on the contrary, the *conditions* of this development are removed from development itself and reveal a supra-historical character. The very idea of formal value is aimed at describing all supra-historical connections, while at the same time maintaining space for what we can call 'indeterminate' as historical. Reflection on formal value cannot therefore be resolved in the simple juxtaposition of historical goods from which values can be deduced; rather, such a classification must have a principle, and the search for this principle leads us in the direction of the meta-historical element. Philosophical reflection on value must therefore take into account certain formal premises that are not involved in the historical and evolutionary process.

In conclusion, the first and fourth levels achieve a form of universality. The first is closely related to sensory perception and the relationship we, as subjects, establish with the world. The fourth, on the other hand, achieves a universality of a formal nature. Instead, the second and third levels, which are strongly connected, merely *aspire* to universality. Subjective and singular value is strongly marked by a cognitive bias: it sees its own point of view as absolute and tends to regard its own assessment of the world as valid; epistemological value represents subjectivity's effort to take a general point of view and to look at things considering the perspective of others. The open challenge faced by a theory of value is to delineate – through the analysis of fields or regions – the connections and transitions between these different levels.

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