

Valuing and Believing Valuable

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What is the relation between valuing something and believing it valuable? Some philosophers think that one cannot believe that something is valuable without valuing it oneself. Michael Smith claims that ‘valuing is believing valuable’ (1992: 344). T. M. Scanlon proposes that to ‘claim that something is *valuable* (or that it is “of value”) is to claim that others also have reason to value it, as you do’ (1998: 95).¹ But as David Lewis points out, circularity threatens any analysis of valuing in terms of believing valuable that fails to explain what believing valuable consists in (1989: 114).

Apart from this structural or logical worry, many philosophers have lately appreciated that, as a matter of psychological fact, one can believe something valuable without valuing it oneself. Gary Watson notes that his own earlier work ‘conflates valuing with judging good’, which is a mistake because ‘judging good has no invariable connection with motivation’ (1987: 150). Sigrún Svavarsdóttir writes that there is a difference between the propositional attitude of judging the Icelandic sagas valuable and ‘being emotionally and motivationally invested in this genre of literature in the way that amounts to valuing it’ (2009: 302). Further examples are not difficult to come by. This phenomenon—believing valuable without valuing—does not necessarily indicate a failure of rationality or wholeheartedness but rather reflects the affective and temporal boundedness of human existence. Valuing comprises a set of emotional attitudes and

¹ As Samuel Scheffler points out (2010: 31 n. 28), Scanlon’s proposal is ambiguous: ‘as you do’ could mean ‘as you value it’ or ‘as you have reason to value it’. Scheffler assumes the first interpretation for the sake of simplicity.

motivational dispositions towards the object of value, so while we are limited in our ability to value, the number of things whose value we can judge is in principle unlimited.

I agree that one can believe that something is valuable without valuing it. My aim in this paper is to argue that one can value something without believing it to be valuable. Any theory of subjective value needs to account for both of these phenomena. I can best argue for this thesis by explaining my divergence from one recent account of valuing, namely Samuel Scheffler's 'complex syndrome' view. Scheffler proposes four necessary conditions on noninstrumental valuing:

- (1) A belief that X is good or valuable or worthy,
- (2) A susceptibility to experience a range of context-dependent emotions regarding X,
- (3) A disposition to experience these emotions as being merited or appropriate,
- (4) A disposition to treat certain kinds of X-related considerations as reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts (2010: 29).²

According to Scheffler, if I value operagoing, for instance, then, first, I must believe that operagoing is valuable. Second, I must be prone to experience certain emotions in response to activities associated with operagoing, such as ecstasy on hearing the finale of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, or disappointment when a performance is canceled due to bad weather. Third, I must be disposed to experience these emotions as appropriate. There is a question, which I address below, as to how to understand this condition, but at a minimum it must rule out cases of conflicting emotions, such as being embarrassed about being moved to sadness at the end of the third act, or troubled by my distress at being

² X might be a thing, person, action, attitude, relationship, ideal or accomplishment (see Scanlon 1998: 95 for a fuller list). I focus here on activities and pursuits as paradigmatic objects of value.

unable to secure tickets to a premiere. Fourth, I must tend to give opera-related activities at least some deliberative priority.

My claim is that just as an agent can meet condition (1) without meeting all four conditions, so can an agent meet conditions (2)-(4) without meeting condition (1). As a matter of psychological fact, it is possible to value something—now understood as meeting conditions (2)-(4)—without believing it valuable. This phenomenon might be brought about in one of two ways, which I call Ignorance and Denial. Ignorance describes the kind of case in which one values something without any conscious awareness that one values it; only in being brought to recognize that one is emotionally susceptible to it is one in a position to judge it valuable. My example will be gradually developing an appreciation of something. Denial describes the kind of case in which one is in a position to make such a judgment and denies that the object is valuable. My examples here are so-called ‘guilty pleasures’ such as trashy television shows.

Before turning to the examples, two initial clarifications are in order, concerning conditions (1) and (3), respectively. Scheffler initially introduces condition (1) as a “view of the object of one’s attitudes as being good or worthy or valuable” (2010: 26), but he then modifies “view” to “belief,” while also employing the notion of “judgments” of value (2010: 30). Since Scheffler says very little about what kind of attitude belief is, or the difference between belief and judgment, I propose, for the purposes of this paper, to understand judgment as active belief-formation and belief as a wider notion encompassing not only conscious but also dispositional and implicit varieties.

Concerning condition (3), Scheffler says little about what it is to experience an emotion as appropriate. He does, however, presume a “close connection” between experiencing one’s emotions as appropriate and believing their object to be valuable (2010: 26), a connection that admits of two interpretations. The first, which Scheffler favors, is that my belief that an object is valuable partially *explains* why I experience my reactions as appropriate, and the second is that my belief is partially *constituted* by such an experience. Since I want to prise apart conditions (1) and (3), I cannot accept the first interpretation, though I concede that the second may be true in some cases of valuing. But my arguments require the claim that we can sometimes experience our emotions as appropriate without believing their objects to be good.

Turning now to the main arguments, consider the example of Rafael, whose story will illustrate, first, Ignorance and then, later on, Denial. Initially, Rafael believes that professional sports are not valuable. That is, he deems that athletes are financially overcompensated relative to their social utility, that sports aficionados create artificial group rivalries that occasionally dispose them to violence, and that spectators are generally wasting their time. But, after living in Munich during the 2008 European Cup, Rafael becomes caught up in the excitement and begins spending time watching the matches in pubs, learning more about the German players, and discussing football with friends. That is, he begins to treat certain football-related considerations as providing reasons for action, meeting condition (4). He becomes susceptible to experience certain emotions, including frustration when Spain scores a goal in the final and disappointment when Germany loses, meeting condition (2). And he experiences these emotions as

merited, meeting condition (3): he takes his frustration and disappointment to be appropriate to their objects, and is not ashamed of his ardor in the stands. Yet he does not judge football to be valuable, even though he meets all the other conditions on valuing. This is a case of Ignorance.

An objector could point out that even though Rafael might not have the occurrent thought that football is good or worthy or valuable, he might be *disposed* to believe that it is, on the basis of the evidence provided by the example thus far. Employing a distinction from Robert Audi, we can assume that Rafael does not have a dispositional belief that football is valuable, “antecedently held but as yet unarticulated” (1994: 419), but may have a disposition to believe, i.e., “a readiness to form a belief” (1994: 424). But then the objector, assuming she has an account like Scheffler’s, would have to modify condition (1) to ‘having a disposition to believe that X is valuable’. This would already be significant, since it would turn out not only that a *belief* is not necessary for valuing, but that conditions (2)-(4) are explanatorily prior to condition (1), since they function as *grounds* for the attribution of the disposition to believe valuable. Given Rafael’s previous conscious belief that football was not valuable, it would seem that the only grounds for attributing a disposition to believe the contrary would be these recent emotional and behavioral changes.

Cases of Denial require even more decisive modifications to a Scheffler-style account. Consider Rafael at a slightly later time: he has been made aware of his own valuing dispositions with regard to football and is asked whether following the sport is a worthy pursuit. And suppose that he still says no. If we take Rafael at his word, there are

at least two different analytical possibilities here, one of which may be amenable to the complex syndrome view but another of which is not.

The first possibility is that Rafael does not really value football at all, but rather something like the heightened atmosphere of the tournament (the ‘buzz’), such that the proper object of his valuing is not football itself but the event of the European Cup, which grips a large population and brings otherwise disparate people together. In valuing the buzz he would meet conditions (2)-(4), but he would also judge the buzz to be valuable, for instance because he judges activities valuable when they promote social cohesion. In fact, the best way of determining whether football is the proper object of Rafael’s valuing would be to observe his behavior after the tournament. If he continues to take an interest in football matches—if he watches the matches and discusses the players with friends and experiences the relevant emotions when the teams he supports win or lose—then it seems likely that he actually does value football and not merely the buzz of the tournament. Thus, one way to preserve a complex syndrome analysis would be to individuate the proper object of valuing more finely, or to reconsider exactly which object the valuing agent is responding to. We can find this out by trying to isolate the object and examining the agent’s emotional and behavioral responses to it. But I doubt that this parsing strategy will work in all cases. Even in the current example, Rafael’s emotions are directed at the matches and their outcomes, not the social atmosphere.

The second possibility is that Rafael does not think that football is valuable but values it nonetheless. This is, I claim, a distinct phenomenon: an agent recognizes that something she values—meeting conditions (2)-(4) with respect to it—is trivial and of no

value, but she still regards her emotions and motivations towards it as appropriate. This need not entail the ‘malady of the spirit’ that Michael Stocker diagnoses in those who are motivated by what they do not believe valuable (1976: 454). Stocker’s concerns apply to things that we value but consciously believe to be *disvaluable*: harmful or wrong in some respect. But my examples are ‘guilty pleasures’ that we value but simply *fail* to believe valuable. We do not regard such things as valuable, but we are not actually guilty about them either, contrary to the name. Thus, Rafael does not see himself as having reason to change his behavior, because he is motivated to act by what he genuinely values, even though he refuses to judge football itself to be valuable.

Many of the things that fall into this category are used for recreation or relaxation, however, which suggests that perhaps we value them only instrumentally. But this is not the case. When we value something only instrumentally, we would abandon it without a sense of loss if the goods it provides were available through alternative means. Suppose that I value some especially trashy or lurid television show: I am excited to see it and would be upset if it were canceled, experience these lower-order emotions as appropriate, and watch the show regularly. It is possible that I believe that the show is a waste of my time and that I ought to devote myself to other pursuits, but I suffer from weakness of will. If so, then my activity might fall into the class that Stocker deplores. But it is also possible that I believe that the show provides much-needed relaxation, and that I am not emotionally susceptible merely to my recreation but to the specific activities that constitute my recreation: it is *this* show that I want to watch, even though I cannot name anything valuable about it. I admit that even within the category of trashy television

shows, there are many others that would probably be more enjoyable or provide more relaxation. But I am not emotionally or motivationally susceptible to those. In short, I *value* the show, even though I refuse to judge it good or valuable or worthy. Examples such as this, I claim, illustrate the phenomenon of valuing without believing valuable.

An objector might insist that although I do not judge the show to be good, I nonetheless must have an implicit belief that it is good. The implicit belief could be tacit, like a belief that has not been consciously stored but is derivable from one's conscious beliefs (Dennett 1978), or it could be passively acquired and not consciously endorsed, like an implicit bias (Gendler 2008). But an implicit value judgment does not seem to fit the mold of other tacit beliefs, such as the belief that 'the moon is not made of cheese', and in any case it would not seem to *follow*, logically or evidentially, from one's other attitudes. More plausible is that one has passively acquired the belief that, say, the trashy television show is valuable. While in general I do not think we should take our occurrent judgments to be infallible indicators of belief (cf. Schwitzgebel 2010), in this case I see no reason, independent of the desire to preserve a Scheffler-style account, to insist on the presence of a passively acquired value judgment. And in any case, to repeat a line from earlier, it would seem that the only grounds for attributing a passively acquired belief would be the emotional and motivational dispositions of conditions (2)-(4), thus establishing, at a minimum, the explanatory priority of those conditions to condition (1).

A different objector might claim that we cannot experience our emotions as appropriate without believing their objects to be good. This is clearly false, however, with respect to emotions whose objects we believe to be bad: we experience our anger as

appropriate when we are insulted, and we experience our sadness as appropriate when a friendship ends. Even in the case of the trashy television show, which I do not believe to be positively disvaluable, not only do I not feel conflicted about my lower-order emotions towards the show, but those emotions present themselves as appropriate. The cancellation of the show would seem to me to merit sadness, even if for no other reason than that I am emotionally vulnerable to it.

Finally, it might be objected that although we do not believe these objects valuable in an impersonal sense, we do believe them to have personal value. Things which have personal, or sentimental, value are considered important only for oneself (cf. Scheffler 2010: 26 n. 24). But whereas the relationship I bear towards my tattered childhood doll is unique, such that no one else could stand in the same relationship to it, there is nothing about my relationship to a trashy television show that precludes others from being emotionally and motivationally susceptible to it in the same way that I am.

The existence of the phenomenon of believing valuable without valuing already establishes that valuing and evaluation are distinct activities (cf. Anderson 1993: 5). The existence of the phenomenon of valuing without believing valuable suggests that they are more distinct than many have thought. Even apart from cases of merely personal value, agents can genuinely value things that they neither believe disvaluable nor believe valuable along a scale of impersonal value. This matters for the adequacy of our moral psychology, which should not assume that human valuing always tracks what is valuable, or even what is believed to be valuable. Sometimes we find ourselves emotionally and

motivationally susceptible to things that do not have positive value. Any theory of subjective value needs to account for this.³

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Abstract: Many philosophers recognize that, as a matter of psychological fact, one can believe something valuable without valuing it. I argue that it is also possible to value something without believing it valuable. Agents can genuinely value things that they neither believe disvaluable nor believe valuable along a scale of impersonal value.