

RATIONALES FOR A CRITICAL APPROACH TO HUMAN VALUES

Bartholomew Nnaemedo*

Abstract

This paper examined rational justifications for a critical approach to human values. Particularly, it investigated how human values' strategic societal importance, the need to mediate the being-having dichotomy, divorce human value theories of linguistic ambiguities, and harmonise the conflicting and multiplicity of values are rational justifications for embarking on a critical inquiry into human values. Anchoring on critical theory, this paper argues that undertaking a critical approach to human values helps to achieve harmony amidst the multiplicity and conflicts of values and discordant value theories. This paper adopted conceptual analysis as a research design. Using this design, it decomposed the key concepts and analysed them using data drawn from previous literature archived in online and offline books, journals and datasets. The study used information relevant to the study and discarded the irrelevant information. The findings showed that human values occupy a strategic position in every society as a moral guide for humans, individually and collectively. The outcomes also revealed the need to harmonise conflicting theories of human values, bridge the being-having dichotomy, and divorce theories of human values from linguistic ambiguities towards a sustainable national human value base or template. Subsequently, this paper concluded that the success of any nation requires harmonisation of its human values in a way that minimises areas of conflict and maximises areas of concordance.

Keywords: Conceptual analysis, critical theory, human values, justification, rationale

Introduction

Human values are one reality that scholars have approached from diverse perspectives. These multiple-dimensional valuation approaches are contingent on man's critical attitude to reality, and multiple orientations resulting in a perspectival conception of reality. Consequently, these twin factors gave rise to a multiplicity of value systems and their resultant theories, which sometimes are conflicting. Then, as humans live in a society, they cannot exist totally independent of others. There is a need for mutual coexistence to forge a common front, which, on the one hand, necessarily requires collaborative engagement in certain areas of life and a realignment of values to pursue and achieve a common goal.

The above realignment is not only goal-oriented. It also requires an inviolable foundation for its justification. It thus implies that value realignment is not merely pragmatically oriented with its workability outlook. Rather, it is founded on a certain objective template to ensure its perennial value. Of course, this search for a basic foundation (*indubitandum*) is not alien to philosophy. It was the initial thrust that propelled early Greek thinkers to search for the ultimate cause of all reality. In this, they sought what united the multiplicity of reality, showing that man is never completely settled with plurality but also tends towards unity, which makes for easy understanding and subsequent application.

The above tendency towards unity amidst multiplicity is even more in contemporary society with its thrust towards globalisation amidst conflicting values, which often leads to what Nietzsche (1967) called transvaluation of values. So, despite stress on multi-dimensional valuation approaches as evidence of man's critical attitude, there is a need to explore the harmonising dimension of man. Admittedly, some works of literature have emphasised this harmonising aspect. As an addendum, this work is not a mere emphasis on it, but rather arguments for its justification. Therefore, based on the above consideration, it is imperative to critically look at the rationales for harmonising conflicting human values towards a functional human society. Nonetheless, before embarking on that, suffice it to conceptualise values.

Conceptualising values

Philosophy has two major branches: speculative or theoretical, and practical or axiological. Speculative philosophy encompasses logic, general metaphysics, and special metaphysics, while practical philosophy comprises ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy. The study of human values is within the domain or area of axiology. Therefore, a deeper insight into human values necessarily requires conceptual clarification of the meaning of values.

The term value derives from the Latin words *valere* -to be strong, to be able, to have the power (to); to be well, fit, healthy; *pretium* -honour; and *aestimare* -esteem (Gerrard & Littlejohn, 2008). The Greek word for value is *axia* (worth, true value). Hence, value means power, worth, honour and esteem, deriving from a thing's price tag. So, ordinarily, one can describe value as the price tag of a thing. Value is what the valuer considers a thing to be. The valuer can be an individual or a community. That means that valuation entails a value situation and a value judgment (Wallace, 2012). The former (value situation) comprises the valuer (the subject that evaluates), the thing evaluated, and the relationship between them. The latter (value judgment) represents the evaluated price tag or summary appraisal. The price tag can be objective or subjective. However, while crediting subjective value, it is relevant to underscore objective value, as denying such would deny the reality of intrinsic value. So, though one can evaluate reality subjectively, the fact remains that reality has certain qualities natural to it, independent of the subjective judgment of the evaluator. It implies that a subjective approach to reality does not, and should not, deny or overshadow its objective understanding. Objective value can be intrinsic (perfective goods) or instrumental (useful goods). The latter embodies truth, beauty, talent, meaning, health, rest, play, morality, and religion (Wallace, 2012).

Human values

Having conceptualised value, it is also pertinent to look at the concept of human values. Admittedly, there has been debate among scholars regarding the nature of human values. This debate drew the likes of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, who, through his transvaluation of values, called for a critique of traditional moral values, insisting on erecting morality on a template of strength instead of weakness, and that man is something to be surpassed (Nietzsche, 2007, 1931, 1917, 1929). Though his call to some extent aligns with man's dynamic nature, it is deficient in erecting morality on a fluid foundation.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or linguistic relativity hypothesis reasoned along the language line, by noting the relationship between a people and their language, particularly how their language structure informs their thought pattern and world perception (Whorf, 1956). Likewise, Sapir (1929) underscored that people's language habits unconsciously influence their real world and predispose their choices of interpretation. It implies that, for the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, language habits shape people's values, as it informs what they prioritise.

Rokeach (1973) identified eighteen terminal (concerned with end-states of existence) and eighteen instrumental values (focused on behavioural modes). However, Tuulik et al (2016) critiqued Rokeach's value lists as lacking adequate importance today to measure and describe the wide and colourful variety of values.

Schwartz (2012) considered value as standing for what is important to people in life. He aligned his view with six features common to all values implicit in various theories of values, differentiating one value from another. In these features, he noted that values:

- i Are beliefs that are inextricably linked to affect,
- ii. Refer to desirable goals that motivate action,
- iii. Transcend particular actions and situations,

- iv. Serve as ideals or criteria,
- v. Are ordered by importance relative to one another,
- vi. Are multiple in nature and guide human action.

He also identified ten basic personal values that are recognised across cultures: universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, and benevolence. These form a circular structure, apparently culturally universal, that reflects the motivations each of them expresses and captures the conflicts and compatibility among them. Further, he categorised these ten personal values into four: openness to change (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism), self-transcendence (universalism, benevolence), conservation (security, conformity, tradition), and self-enhancement (hedonism, achievement, power). Here, hedonism falls between openness to change and self-transcendence. Notably, these primary personal values provide support for human daily engagements and aspirations, implying that human value is both personally and societally oriented.

Kanyakumari (2021) described human values as virtues, and as such, positive dispositions that create bonds of humanity between people and thus have value for all human beings. Besides, Kanyakumari identified the following instances of human values: brotherhood, friendship, empathy, compassion, love, openness, listening, welcoming, acceptance, recognition, appreciation, honesty, fairness, loyalty, sharing, solidarity, civility, respect and consideration. These values are reciprocal, implying personal and societal relevance and pointing to the need for harmonising human values.

Rani et al. (2022) underscored the importance of universal human values in human life, stressing that they provide a meaning to the life of a human being and lead to a peaceful and harmonious life, and so are required as a moral guide for children in school. Subsequently, this also points to the need to harmonise human values to serve man better. To Sharma (2024), human values serve as the keystone of human existence, offering guiding principles for life, people's divergent orientations notwithstanding. It is pivotal for improving professional ethics among teachers in schools. By implication, harmonisation of human values is necessary given the above pivotal role.

However, despite the useful insight from the literature reviewed above, it is significant to indicate that one area that has remained underexplored is the issue of rational justifications for a critical approach to human values. This gap in knowledge is what the paper sought to fill. Nevertheless, before diving into that subject matter, it is necessary to operationalise the concept of human value and discuss types of human values. Hence, this paper defines human values as the basic moral template that guides humans in their daily engagements towards responsible living.

Types of human values

There are many types of values: personal, moral, aesthetic, epistemic, cultural, instrumental, intrinsic, spiritual, social, environmental, legal, philosophical, global, professional, existential, pragmatic, virtue, and utilitarian values (Anyanwu, 2009; Ochiagha, 1994; Hungerford et al., 1994). They are interrelated and overlap. However, below are only some of them.

Personal values

Personal values are subjective life determiners that enable people to achieve their aims in life. They are individuals' templates that serve primarily to realise and optimise their targets. According to Anyanwu (2009), they include cleanliness, contentment, creativity, determination, etc.

Aesthetic values

Aesthetic values guide humans in art, beauty, taste, etc. A little explanation will help us understand aesthetic values more. The word aesthetics is from the Greek term *aisthetikos*, which means sensitive or sentient. The Latin word for aesthetics is *pulchritudinis amans* (beauty or excellence lover) or *artificiosus*,

which stands for "ingenious, artistic, artificial" (Gerrard & Littlejohn, 2008, pp.19, 30 & 285). So, from its root, aesthetics investigates the nature of art, beauty, and taste (Nnaemedo, 2023).

As a branch of practical philosophy, aesthetics critically investigates the value of art and nature to make value judgments on them. So, one can also call it the philosophy of art and beauty, given that it deals with what Tsekos & Petsiou (2018) call aesthetically remarkable, as they consider it as embodying all that comes via the senses of sight and hearing or our consciousness, causing pleasure or resentment. For this reason, Munro & Scruton (2020) note that aesthetics deals with the responses to natural objects expressed in the language of the beautiful and the ugly.

Cultural values

Cultural values are the ideals governing people's behaviours within a culture. According to Ochiagha (1994), they include respect, dressing, greetings, hard work, and obedience. Added to these are care, humility, sincerity, and honesty outside the above instances.

Moral values

Moral values are the ideals that control and foster people's ethical evaluation regarding their dos and don'ts. They comprise honesty, uprightness, truthfulness, modesty, temperance, prudence, and self-control.

Psychological values

Psychological or behavioural values are ideals that enable humans to attain life fulfilment. They include tender care, understanding, sympathy, self-control, empathy, reward, motivation, encouragement, job satisfaction, etc.

Economic values

They are ideals for achieving an optimal economy that improves people's welfare. Ochiagha (1994) noted the following instances: hard work, temperance in using money and materials, and use of time.

Instrumental values

Instrumental values are ideals that enable humans to attain some end or result. Their value only lies in what they help humans accomplish, no more.

Intrinsic values

They are natural ideals that enable humans to achieve their objectives. They are unaffected by situations but are stable, irrespective of the person concerned.

Spiritual values

They are the ideals that help humans achieve their divine objectives. They guide their belief system and relationships with God, humans, and other creatures. These ideals regulate the attainment of their supernatural end. According to Ochiagha (1994), they are worship, fear of God, modesty, religious practice, etc.

Social values

They are ideals that guide societal welfare as they portray its living mode and path to harmony and development attainment. According to Ochiagha (1994), the ideals include humans' appreciation for others, respect for others, interaction with others, love of others, courtesy, tolerance, friendship patterns, etc.

Environmental values

They are ideals that guide human relationships with nature. They define human relations to nature and propel them to respect, manage, and preserve them. Pope Francis's (2015) book *Laudato Si* is a popular work on preserving and sustaining nature. Instances of these values are nature conservation.

Professional values

These are ideologies that guide people in their different professions. They define what a given profession esteems and indicate how to achieve, preserve and sustain it. They include fair play, punctuality, industry, competence, reliability, honesty, modesty, etc.

Political values

These are the ideals that regulate human actions in the political realm and help them achieve their political goals. According to Ochiagha (1994), they comprise patriotism, tolerance, altruism, democracy, fairness to all, leading by example, freedom, justice, loyalty, unity, peace, etc.

Legal values

These define what is legitimate for a given society and help maintain proper conduct and rights of members. They embody justice, equity, fairness, transparency, accountability, responsibility, equality, etc.

Global or universal values

Global values are objective values esteemed across cultures that ensure international and intercultural relationships. Thus, they are principles cutting across cultures that help guide inter-society interactions. One can describe global values as universal values. They include honesty, truthfulness, justice, fairness, respect, modesty, etc.

Pragmatic values

These are ideals that tend towards practical results. They are based on the ideals of pragmatism, where workability and usefulness are the end in view. A principle is valuable if it helps attain the desired result.

Existential values

These ideals define the nature of human life and guide them in properly understanding it by exposing them to its beginning, daily engagements, and goals.

Virtue values

They are the principles that guide human ethical behaviour. They show people how they ought to behave towards themselves and others. They also indicate behaviours that are inimical to proper human relationships.

Utilitarian values

These ethical ideologies guide humans to maximise their utility for the happiness (pleasure) of the greatest majority. They are values based on the principle of utilitarianism.

Justifications for a critical inquiry into human value

There are multiple reasons for undertaking a critical inquiry into the nature of human values. These include the need to expose the strategic importance of value to human action, the need to mediate the being-having dichotomy, divorce theories of linguistic ambiguities, and harmonise the multiplicity of values.

Human values are strategic to humans.

Human values are crucial to humans, individually and collectively, serving domestic and professional purposes. Given its pivotal place in human life, one can never exhaust its relevance. Underscoring the above point, Anyanwu (2009) sustained that human values are "reference points for human beings in their

behaviours, choices, actions and omissions" (p.3). The role of values to human beings is comparable to the function of the rudder and compass in ships and aeroplanes, respectively. Just as the above apparatuses direct a ship and a plane, values are life determiners and guides. Values give direction to action and sustain it enduringly. Human values determine people's focus and the sphere they could leave unattended. Human values define people's terminal and instrumental values, empowering them to reach their destinations using a proper trajectory (Rokeach, 1973). It implies that human values are not merely concerned with the end in view but the mode of attaining the end. What this means is that human values point to a direction or destination in view and ensure that one gets there safely and responsibly. Hence, human values take both the means and the end into consideration in every action.

Therefore, the above strategic status of human values informs the need for a critical inquiry into them to ensure the attainment of each of their objectives in a way that is consistent with human integral development. That means ensuring that the terminal and instrumental dimensions of human values are respected and effectively utilised. Achievement of the above harmony requires value literacy for proper awareness and orientation towards optimal utilisation of human values.

Need to mediate the being-having dichotomy.

The contemporary society is one that sometimes emphasises material acquisition more than improving the being of humans. This emphasis brings two tensions: conflicting values and the end-means conflicts. The former consists of the tension between conflicting values, such as between openness to change and conservation values, and between self-transcendence and self-enhancement values (Schwartz, 2012). Then, concerning the latter, there is end-mean tension.

The tension between conflicting values requires an adequate understanding of each of them to know their area of alignment and misalignment with each other. This understanding is necessary to determine the area of emphasis and underemphasis, by way of maximising the favourable and minimising the unfavourable. Favourable and unfavourable in this context stand for areas of divergence and convergence, respectively.

Similarly, the end-means tension is the mistaking of means for ends and vice versa. It entails mistaken identity, where what should be a step to reality is mistaken for the reality in view. Taken in the metaphysical sense, it implies mistaking potentiality for actuality, that is, it takes a resource for its end product. This tendency was well captured in Marcel (1949) and Pope John Paul II's (1987), where they called for improving the being of man as against his having. Their stress was on avoiding misplacement of a means for an end, a philosophical orientation that would project workability and result in disregard for objective values. Instead, this promotes relativism with its attendant moral laxity and truncation of human values. Under such circumstances, it is critical to reorder the human value system to accord each its proper place and to avoid misalignment of values and the crisis of transvaluation of values.

Need to divorce value theories of linguistic ambiguities.

Critical inquiry into human values has a linguistic dimension, given that language is a crucial ethical tool. Such is the case, as ethical theories are expressed in language. Then, given that these theories are about man and his environment, they are, to a certain extent, socially constructed (Searle, 1995; Wittgenstein, 2009). Ipso facto, these ethical theories require language, the Heideggerian house of being, to be penetrated and understood (Heidegger, 1947). This approach divests them of certain presuppositions that cloud their meanings and understanding. Whorf-Sapir hypothesis or linguistic relativity presents one such instance (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1929). Another dimension is the idea of labelling of values, in which humans assign values to things that may intrinsically deviate from their worth (Nietzsche, 2007). This

wrong assignation of values could result from ambiguities of a semantic nature, or a situation where one has to accept certain linguistic constructions as valid, when in actual sense they have some flaws. This kind of entrapment might lead one to accept as true what is fundamentally flawed. There could also be a case of linguistic manipulation of other kinds, especially to satisfy the organisational policy of organisations. Such an organisation, through agenda-setting theory, evolves policies that fundamentally reflect its goals. However, when one reads such an organisational goal outside its set objectives, there is a high probability of arriving at a false conclusion.

Besides, there is the issue of newspeak, in which an organisation or people can represent their value in a subdued manner, that is, in such a way that it requires certain expertise to decode. Similar phenomena occur in the domain of digital semantics, where digital media use certain expressions and emojis that are understandable by digital media initiates to articulate and convey their media house values. Hence, values set under the above platforms require a critical approach for proper insight and application. With these linguistic gabs unvested, the ethical theories are left with the most visible and acceptable mode of their existence.

Need for harmonised human values.

Conflicts and multiplicity are features of human values, given humans' critical approach to life and diverse orientations. Instances of such conflicts are evident in the tensions between truth-telling and maintaining confessional secrecy, self-conservation and self-enhancement, personal development and family responsibility, etc. Nonetheless, humans have made efforts at harmonising these conflicting and multiple values to improve their well-being. Nonetheless, this paper argues that philosophy plays a crucial role in the harmonising process. In this context, harmonisation does not mean total removal of all discordant notes. Rather, it entails organising human values in a way that places each in a category that allows for their optimal utilisation. It implies knowing, in a given situation, negotiable (trade-offs) and non-negotiable (non-compromisable) human values, respectively. Thus, harmonising conflicting and multiple human values requires the following trajectories:

- i. Identify the problems surrounding the values,
- ii. Frame the problem concerning the values,
- iii. Clarify the value-related problem - ensuring removal of ambiguities
- iv. Undertake hermeneutics of the value-related problem - interpreting it contextually and otherwise,
- v. Seek a way to reconcile the outcome of the interpretation,
- vi. Thoughtfully consider the outcomes of the interpretation,
- vii. Grade the outcomes in order of their importance or priority,
- viii. Implement the result of the prioritisation, and
- ix. Reflect alongside the implementation process to ensure appropriate feedback.

The nine processes above are reducible to three: clarify (i-iii), interpret (iv-vi), and grade (vii-ix).

Application of the trajectories above helps one to navigate the issue of multiplicity of human values by seeking the basics or most prioritisable values amid the multiplicity of values, given that philosophy is a search for the ultimate reality. So, by focusing on the basics or the most prioritisable of the different values, philosophy helps to look beyond the diversity of values to what unites them or their primary principle. Subsequently, one's choice of values rests on one's closeness or affinity to these fundamental values. Classification of values is, in turn, according to this prioritisation. A value's placement depends on the same criterion. It also helps to resolve the issues of conflicting values since the acceptability of each conflicting value now lies in its correlation with the already established standard of valuation achieved through philosophy. Likewise, philosophy resolves the issue of diverse value theories by considering each theory as a perspective on the value theoretical framework, given the nonavailability of a generally accepted theory of human values among scholars.

Conclusion

Human values are a significant dimension of human beings, as they regulate human actions and inactions, and constitute the basis of moral judgment. Human values determine humans' approach to issues in life and their conception of rightness and wrongness. They are comparable to rudders and compasses guiding man as he steers the sea of life and flies across various regions of life situations. There are different kinds of human values. They foist the crises of human values: multiplicity and conflicts. To douse the crises, there arose the need for a critical approach to human values. This paper presented four arguments to justify this approach by exposing the strategic relevance of human values in life, the necessity of mediating the being-having dichotomy, divorcing theories of linguistic ambiguities, and harmonising the multiplicity of and conflicting human values. Subsequently, it argued that embarking on a critical approach to human values ensures the attainment of harmony amidst the conflicting and diversity of human values and discordant value theories. Thus, it concluded that the success of any nation requires harmonisation of its human values in a way that minimises areas of conflict and maximises areas of concordance. Hence, it recommends teaching this critical approach to human values in schools in a manner that portrays their areas of strength towards their optimal utilisation.

***Bartholomew Nnaemedo**

Abia State University, Uturu

Department of Religious Studies/Philosophy

nnaemedo.bartholomew@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2691-7890>

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