

Human Values And Their Foundations: Towards An Ethic Of Living Right (EOUSLY)

Mesembe Ita Edet, Ph.D

Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Calabar – Nigeria, E-mail mesitaedet@yahoo.co.uk.

Abstract

The paper explores human axiological values with a view to determining their foundations. It locates the foundation of human values from various sources which include religion and the fear and worship of God, formal institutions (such as schools, the family, organizations), social conventions, customs, traditions, norms and standard practices of the society, human rationality, social class, and from constitutionalism. The paper observes that there has been a spin and an intrusion of human values, both in the unfolding of global events and in human perception, judgment, choices and preferences such that there is a dominance and prevalence of negative tendencies and aberrant values. This is the challenge of the paper. If philosophy must be the effective guide in promoting human values and therefore the social order needed for sustainable development in the contemporary world, then African philosophers must rise up to the challenge of addressing the value crisis and values vacuum in modern Africa. Consequently, our approach is critical and prescriptive, as the paper in the final analysis prescribes “values- rejuvenation and value-revitalization through a process of cultural self-regeneration”. We propose that the process of cultural self-regeneration requires that we go back to African religion for moral guidance, with a commitment to “living right”. All said, the paper espouses an ethic of right living founded on a humanistic religion of righteousness.

Key words: *Human values, values-rejuvenation, value revitalization, cultural self regeneration, righteousness.*

1. Introduction

The Axiological dimension of philosophical studies and interests concerns values – human values and cultural values. Andrew Uduguiwomen posits that “*The question of value revolves around what a person or society conceives as being good, valuable, desirable or preferable*” (Uduguiwomen, 2009, p.32). Theophilus Okere and William Frankena also consider values in similar light. Okere says that “*values are what is regarded as good, as desirable, as worthwhile*” (Okere, 1978, p. 6). Frankena on his part maintains that values are what a man or woman have or think to be good (Frankena, 1997, p.230). Given these understanding what can be maintained then is that value is a property of objects, including physical objects as well as abstract objects (e.g. actions, situations or relations), representing their degree of importance or worth.

People often confuse “value” with values. Consequently there is need for some clarification. The term “value” is ambiguous. There are three basic senses of “value” which appear in everyday speech and in philosophical literature:

- (i) Value is what a thing is worth
- (ii) Value is a valuable (a) thing or (b) property (quality), something in which valuableness is ascribed.
- (iii) Value is an idea which makes us consider given objects, qualities, actions, events, relations or situations as valuable.

Let us look more closely at these three basic meanings:

(i) Value as what a thing is worth:

“What is the value of this house?” “The Naira has little or no value”. These are obvious instances of using “value” to refer to the worth of a thing. It is typical of economic contexts. The Marxian theory of surplus value adopts value in this economic sense.

But the use of “value” in this sense also appears in ethical and aesthetic contexts as in when one asks, “Has the life of a genius greater value than the lives of ten average men?”, or in “Under the impact of Afi Ekong’s research the value of traditional Efik art and craft has grown considerably” This sense of value may be described as *quantitative*. This sense of value is not very essential for Axiology or the philosophy of value.

(ii) **Value as something to which valuableness is ascribed:**

When we say that somebody's action's possess a great social value, or a given sculpture a high artistic value, or that the value of somebody's behaviour consists in his altruism, or that the value of a novel lies in the wealth of its language—we use the term “value” in the second sense. This sense of value may be described as *attributive or ascriptive* because here value is ascribed to objects, properties or facts. Again, this sense of value is not very essential for Axiology or the philosophy of value.

(iii) **Value as idea which makes us consider objects, qualities, actions, events, relations or situations as valuable:**

When somebody says that the value of a literary work consists in its originality (i.e. that being original is a valuable property), we have to assume that originality is a value. To recognize as valuable, acts of charity, we have to consider charity a value; regarding honour as a value makes honorable behaviour valuable. In this context we are using “Value” as a certain *idea*; something like the Platonic *form*; some kind of principle, or criterion, which allows us to evaluate particular occurrences, objects, qualities, actions, events, relations or situations – and, consequently, to ascribe to them value, positive or negative.

Here we see some overlap of the second meaning above, but the second meaning is distinguishable from this third meaning. This last meaning of “value” we may call *axiological*. This is the most important and essential sense for Axiology or the philosophy of value.

The quantitative, attributive and axiological meanings of “value” have acquired a firm footing and seem to be well embedded in everyday language, and prospects for eliminating any one of them, or of allotting a special, separate term to one of them are bleak. We should, therefore, demand only that when using the term “value”, philosophers clearly realize and indicate the sense in which they understand it.

It is the frequent confusion of meanings which causes endless misunderstandings. For instance, when a physician says that drug X is of greater value in the treatment of *abruptio placentae* than drug Y and a member of the Jehovah's Witness or Apostolic Faith refuses to grant any value to medical treatment, they both are considering “value” in different senses. Whereas the physician means “value” in the attributive sense, the Christian takes “value” in the Axiological sense. The quantitative sense of “value” can appear independently whenever value is measurable in accordance with commonly accepted standards, i.e. when applied to commodities, money, and the like, in economics and so on.

In G. O. Ozumba's analysis of the concept of “value”, he submits that the term “value” could be used as a noun and a verb. He writes that,

As a noun, it is sometimes used in abstract terms. In concrete terms value is used to represent things that are tangible and are of utility to us. Here we mean things like cars, book, houses, etc. As an abstract noun, it designates the property of value or of being valuable. Here, for instance, we might talk of things like happiness, beauty, pleasure, satisfaction and even the notion of God. Value in its real sense is used as an equivalence to worthwhileness or goodness, i.e. the desired good in which case evil is used or seen as having no value (Ozumba,2001, p. 40).

The above senses of “value” refer to value in its quantitative and attributive senses. As we have pointed out, these are not really essential to Axiology.

But Ozumba also notes that “*value, when used as a verb denotes a certain mental act or attitude of valuation. Here, what happens is that value is seen in the light of an activity which either is an end itself or a means to an end*” (Ozumba,2001, p.40). This reference indeed is a reference to value in its axiological sense. Note the reference to a *certain mental act or attitude of valuation* and relate this to value as *idea which makes us consider objects, qualities, actions, events, relations or situations as valuable*.

The factor of “valuing” is an inevitable consequence of man's rationality. It is so intrinsic to man that just as one can say that man is a valuing animal, it could also be said that man is a valuing animal. Man is an “evaluating animal”. His behaviour is grounded in valuation. Values are the basic and fundamental substructure in all matters of our choices, preferences and decision-making. This is to say that valuing is an inherent component of human nature. Again this means that human values are essentially natural. The desire for good, what is right and what is just is natural to humankind.

To assess the value of particular acts, objects, or qualities or to ascribe value to kinds of behaviour, products, properties, situations or relations, we must have at our disposal criteria which make such assessment and ascription possible. It is Axiology, the philosophy of value which sets these criteria. Axiologists investigate how people determine the valuableness of objects, properties, or states of affairs and how those value assignments either represent or distort reality.

To value is to set priorities. It is to choose one thing over another or others. Values are specific items that people stand for, believe in, deem important and cherish. They are those things that really matter to each of us, the ideas and beliefs we hold as special. People value so as to determine their Values.

Now, social life is impossible without a system of value. (Uduigwomen, 2009, p.32). In all human societies- primitive or civilized, traditional or modern, developed, developing or underdeveloped, values exist in some perceptible manner. We can then say that values are a conglomerate or set of institutional ideals cherished and considered desirable either by an individual or by a group of people.

We have stated that values are an inherent component of human nature and that they are thus essentially natural. We shall further argue that despite certain cultural contingencies and communal peculiarities, values are universal, precisely because human nature itself is universal. The crux of my discussion is that human values are intrinsically designed to fulfill man's goal of individual and collective preservation and survival. In fact one can say that the infinite superiority of humans over animals lies in the human capacity to adopt the strategy of cooperation, social solidarity and mutual dependence for the goal of preservation and survival. Therefore, the human tendencies to pursue virtues such as peace, love, care, justice, truthfulness, integrity friendliness, sincerity, beauty, honesty, etc, are naturally embraced to ensure the wellbeing and survival of humankind.

However, one notices today that there has been a spin in and an intrusion of human values, both in the unfolding of global events and in human perception, judgement, choices and preferences such that there is a dominance and prevalence of negative tendencies and aberrant values. Today the negative tendencies of greed, selfishness, licentiousness, covetousness, lust, pride, materialism, envy, wickedness, war-mongering, callousness, corruption, dominate and have become the norm. It is a situation of valuing negatively. The question this situation provokes is, to what extent are these negative tendencies and values an inherent part of human nature? Are we also naturally greedy, selfish? Do human beings have a natural tendency to violence and to live in conflict? These questions prompt the investigation of the origin, foundation and evolution of human values.

2. The Realms of values and their Foundations:

Values are manifest at various realms of human existence and interactions. Let us consider some of these and attempt to trace the foundations of such values.

(i) Religious values and spiritual values:

Religious values have basically to do with the fear of God. Religious values would include the quest for salvation; righteousness; aspiration for eternal life, self realization, spiritual discipline, meditation, etc.

(ii) Ethical or moral values:

These have to do with honesty, promise keeping, integrity, love, forgiveness, mercy, faithfulness, generosity, etc.

Traditionally the fear of God and adherence to his commands are the source or foundation of religious and spiritual values. This fear of God and adherence to his commands yield religious systems. These religious systems provide the basis or foundation of certain ethical or moral values. The foundation of values here is considered to be divine revelation. Of course, part of any religious system is its moral values which regulate and harmonize human life. It is religion which tells us what is right and what is wrong; what is good and what is evil, what is just and what is a vice. God is considered to have commanded these do's and don't's. No society can exist without morals. Religion enriches people's morals, for the welfare of the individual and society at large. It is morals which build relationships between people and between them and the world around.

Christianity for instance contains excellent virtues, as expressed in the following Biblical passages: *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"* (Matt. 22:39) *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* (Matt. 5:44), *"whatever you wish that men will do to you, do so to them"* (The Golden Rule), (Matt. 5:44). *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven; Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted; Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied; Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy; Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God; Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called sons of God; Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven"* (Matt.5). *So faith, love, hope abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinth. 13:13)*. These provisions indicate the values which adherents of the Christian faith must uphold.

Islam on its part regards Mohammed as the greatest of all prophets and the Koran as the most complete of all scriptures, but it also believes in Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets and regards the five books of Moses, David's Psalms and the gospels of Jesus as its scriptures. Consequently, Islamic virtues have many

points in common with Judeo-Christian virtues. In this way, the religion teaches values which originally had many points in common with the systems of values of other religions and requires its adherents to practice these values.

(iii) **Economic or Business values:**

Economic values have to do with wealth, profit, economic power, fame, etc.

(iv) **Political values:**

These have to do with values such as freedom of speech, free and fair elections, good governance, peace, security, independence; etc.

(v) **Legal values:**

These have to do with equity, justice, rights, constitutionalism, etc.

(vi) **Social and cultural values:**

Cultural values have to do with the customs, traditions and ways of life of a people. For instance respect for elders and care of the aged in African culture.

(vii) **Institutional values:**

Institutional values have to do with institutional rules and expectations such as for instance attending church service every Sunday, signing the time-book in the office every day, commitment, loyalty, sacrifice, etc.

(viii) **Personal and Family values:**

These have to do with values such as integrity, honesty, truthfulness, diligence, loyalty, kinship, etc.

(ix) **Educational values:**

Educational values have to do with the valuing of knowledge, information, character formation, ingenuity, technology, intelligence, expertise, etc.

(x) **Aesthetic values:**

These have to do with valuing beauty, creativity, originality, clean environment, etc.

(xi) **Medical values:**

These have to do with valuing good health, peace of mind, etc.

Beyond religion and its dictates and ethical principles, there are value principles which are not necessarily a product of religion and these also provide a source or a foundation of values. These principles may be a product of formal institutions, such as the schools, social organizations, the family institution, social conventions, social customs, traditions, norms or standard practices of the society or a social class. All of these are sources or foundations of the latter realms of values discussed above-economic, political, legal, institutional, cultural, family, educational, aesthetic and medical.

The American value of freedom, self reliance or a strong work ethic for instance, may not be products of religion. Neither is the African value for reciprocal kindness and cooperation necessarily a product of religion. Human rationality itself and the fluxities of practical life also constitute the foundation of certain values. Certain values are fashioned according to the peoples own understanding of the nature of human society, human relations, human goals and the meaning of human life.

Indeed the foundation of the value of individual freedom and respect for individual rights for instance, which is so highly cherished by the Americans is traceable to the American constitution which bears the following simple words that constitute the foundation of government in America: "*we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these, are LIFE, LIBERTY and the pursuit of HAPPINESS*".

According to Barack Obama, 44th American president, in his book *Audacity of Hope*,
...that we are born into this world free, all of us; that each of us arrives with a bundle of rights that cant be taken away by any person or any state without just cause; that through our own agency we can, and must, make of our life what we will – is one that every American understands. It orients us, sets our course, each and every day (Obama, 2007, p.53).

Here we see that the source or foundation of value is legal or constitutional.

The point made from the foregoing is that the foundation of human values derive from various sources which include religion and the fear and worship of God, formal institutions (such as schools, the family, organizations), social conventions, customs, traditions, norms and standard practices of the society, human rationality, social class, and from constitutionalism. All of these constitute sources or foundations of our values.

3. The Intrusion of human values and the value crisis in modern Africa

We have maintained earlier that human values are essentially natural. Being natural, they are inevitably universal. They are universal precisely because human nature itself is universal. We have also postulated that

human values are intrinsically designed to fulfill man's goal of individual and collective preservation and survival and consequently that the human tendencies to pursue virtues such as peace, justice, truthfulness, friendships, honesty, charity, solidarity, care, mutual cooperation are naturally embraced to ensure the wellbeing and survival of humankind. Indubitably then, philosophy must be the effective guide in promoting human values and therefore the social order needed for sustainable development in the contemporary world.

We are cognizant of the fact that there are bound to be disagreements over specific values held to be universally applicable to all human societies. By and large, however, analysts will agree that virtues such as truth, respect, for the sanctity of human life; justice, duty, loyalty, responsibility, peace, friendship, love, benevolence, integrity, gratitude, faithfulness, promise keeping, etc are part and parcel of our human identity toward which societies and people strive or evolve. We believe, for example that fellow-feeling, practicing care, generosity, seeking peace of mind, keeping promises, adhering to sincerity, truthfulness, desiring peace, are intrinsic human values found among all human beings, in all societies and at all times. We would not believe that any human society can survive long, if a majority or all of its members embrace the opposites of these values; if they live on the principles of egotism, selfishness, faithlessness, immorality, wickedness, hate, violence, chaos, conflict and such other negative tendencies. Such negative tendencies and aberrant values are a distortion of human nature, which is essentially good. Is it not said that the Good Creator created man in his own image and likeness? Man is thus a spark of divine creation with the innate capacity to choose what is good and true, what is right and just. In a word: To value appropriately.

The question that arises then is, if moral values, righteousness orderliness, virtue or doing good have been somewhat grafted in all human beings, what accounts for their periodic rise and decline, and variations across cultures?

Kwasi Wiredu laments the conditions of modern Africa in the following words:

Contemporary African experience is marked by a certain intellectual anomaly. The African today, as a rule, lives in a cultural flux characterized by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and a foreign cultural legacy of a colonial origin. Implicated at the deepest reaches of this cultural amalgam is the super imposition of western conceptions of the good upon African thought and conduct (Wiredu, 1995, p.33).

Wiredu further points out that *"The issues involved here are of utmost existential urgency, for it may well be that many of the instabilities of contemporary African society are traceable to this circumstance"* (Wiredu, 1995, p.33).

Indeed there has been a large-scale deterioration of positive values in African society, particularly since the 20th century and especially in the past 30 to 40 years. Traditional ideas of right and wrong have been gradually worn away and a values vacuum has been created. A strong contributing factor to this phenomenon in Africa is modernity and the developments in technology and the economy.

From the communalistic African society which made clear what is morally correct, by means of strict rules, modernity has introduced a society which is more liberal and individualistic. Morality is now a thing that most individuals feel they can decide for themselves. Also African communities have adopted a system of market economy, which is based on competition and propelled by selfishness. In the wake of this selfishness has grown the brutality that marks our daily life, as well as corruption, which has reached right up to the government of most African modern day states. People think of themselves and the maximum gratification of their desires whilst neglecting the common good.

Modern Africa is a "monetized" society as people are more focused on money than they were a generation ago. The yearning for money has over powered other values like civility, respect for others, honesty at work and in relations with others. Trust and family values have been compromised. Greed in society is on the increase. Sexual promiscuity, crime, violence and disregard for the value of human life has become the order of the day.

N.S.S. Iwe graphically expresses the moral condition (in Nigeria as all over African society) when he states that nowadays, it has become impossible for any observant citizen to ignore the following disquieting features of our society: frequent breaches of trust and confidence, domestic indiscipline and instability, laxity in sex morality, insidious phenomenal increase in pornographic materials, distaste for the religious and spiritual in certain circles, conscienceless promptitude to use power authoritatively for selfish repressive and oppressive purpose; unpatriotic and unjustifiable political discrimination and victimization, scandalous politicking on the corridors of power, unhealthy election malpractices as well as political arrogance and bitterness; readiness to sacrifice all values-no matter how high, sacrosanct or strategic – in the senseless worship of, and mad rush for money and wealth, the scandalous practice of diverting public funds into private coffers and of inflating

government contracts and other business deals in the hope of eventual kick backs or “P-R”; growing incidence of armed robbery and other forms of violent crimes, careless attitude to public property, disrespect for constituted authority, conspicuous lack of sense of duty and punctuality (Iwe, 1983, p. 189).. Indeed, an earthquake threatens the very foundations of positive human values in this generation and the consequence is the inevitable collapse of social order.

We have noted that one of the major factors contributing to this intrusion of human values engendering the value crisis of our times is modern technology and its products. Take the media culture for instance. Television producers, the movie moguls, the fashion advertisers, the gangster rappers and a host of players within the electronic media-cultural complex are the transmitters of very harmful values. These trend setters exert an extremely powerful hold on our culture and our children in particular and they often have had little or no sense of responsibility for the harmful values they are purveying.

Responsible parents today are consequently locked in a bitter competition with the media culture as to who will influence and raise their children. Where this media culture is unchallenged as the standard setter, then the child’s sense of right and wrong and his priorities in life are shaped primarily by what he learns from the television, the movie screen, the CD player and the awesome internet.

4. The Need for Values Rejuvenation and Revitalization

We have insistently maintained that human positive values are grounded in human nature. Human beings by nature like order, peaceful coexistence, tolerance, solidarity, welfare, stability, justice, equity. But it is the fate of the human person that he is characterized first, by freewill and the capacity to make choice; second, man stands above other animals because he is a product not only of nature, but also of culture and institutions; and third appropriate conditions do not always exist for humanity to express its naturalness. But man cannot run away from that innate tendency to uphold moral and positive values, to do what is right and good. Of course it is in his own interest to do so because human values are intrinsically designed to fulfill man’s goal of individual and collective preservation and survival.

Consequently what is required in this situation of values crisis or values vacuum is *values-rejuvenation* and *value-revitalization* through a process of *cultural self-regeneration*. The point is that human positive values are so resilient and this is why in spite of disruption, erosions and intrusions of positive human values by negative tendencies, social order is still sustained. But then human values are always in need of conscious rejuvenation and revitalization. Here we must emphasize the socializing role of religion and education in moulding human conduct and promoting values reconstruction, rejuvenation and revitalization. We posit that another reason for the values crisis and values vacuum which we face in Africa today is secularization. Secularization has afforded people the opportunity to take their stand on different view points on their own. So much progress has been made in modern Africa in the area of the development of science and technology but in contrast ethically we have suffered tremendous regress. We propose that we must go back to religion for positive guidance, moral guidance. Religion is not looked to presently for moral guidance as much as it was in the past.

If we consider that religion is by far the richest part of the African heritage, the point made will be appreciated. Religion is found in all areas of human life. It has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economic activities. We can say therefore, that religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life. Because of its great importance in the life of African peoples, religion should be taken very seriously.

We note though that in modern Africa, Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions, though both coexist side by side with traditional African religion. The trend these days in the teaching and practices of Christianity and Islam respectively is to place emphasis on salvation and an eventual paradise for the faithful. Very little premium is placed on the all-important issue of good conduct, discipline, morality and positive values. The consequence is that, yes, there is so much religiosity and so little morality. There are so many religious persons, but so few good men and women. What we desire is religion that will make people live upright, positive and principled, disciplined moral lives. Religion that will be the tonic to rejuvenate and revitalize our innate capacity to live purposefully and value the right things. Stated in one word, our position is that what is required is not mere sanctimonious religious posturing, but a genuine and authentic commitment to *righteousness*, a commitment of humanity to doing right. We must aspire to fulfill our essential human nature as good human beings living in peace and harmony for our collective preservation and welfare, before we aspire to be angels who wish to live with God in paradise, with other angels, ancestors or spirits. Of course, everybody wishes to go to “Heaven” but so few are willing to die.

The time-tested values of hard work, discipline, truth, loyalty, honesty, integrity, probity, dedication, cooperation, and the basic family values of love, caring, selflessness, equity, sharing, generosity, steadfastness,

commitment, tolerance, patience and so on, must be the values which education must promote because indeed education is the vehicle for transmitting the values which are human life-enhancing and consolidating of the social order. Any educational process or system which encourages or promotes aberrant tendencies and negative values is dubious and anti-social. Our aspiration must be towards the installation of a social order that guarantees the full expression of all the positive values endowed in us by virtue of our humanity.

In the cultivating of these core positive humanistic values, the family institution must be brought into critical focus and further strengthened because the family stands at the foundation of the entire social and political order. Indeed the civil state is “families-writ-large”. Thus by the cultivation and promotion of family ethics and values in individual families, the whole social order can be maintained. The family is the school of love and peace. The curriculum would include learning how to value appropriately, how to choose what is good and true, what is right and just, how to appreciate and love. Peace in the families is the basis for peace in the society and strong united families make for a stable and strong society.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing we have argued the following claims:

- (i) That values are an inherent component of human nature and that they are thus essentially natural and further that being natural, they are universal.
- (ii) That human values are intrinsically designed to fulfill man’s goal of individual and collective preservation and survival.
- (iii) That negative tendencies and aberrant values are a distortion of human nature which is essentially good, being a spark of divine creation.
- (iv) That though values are an inherent component of human nature, several other sources also provide the foundations of our values.
- (v) That modernity, developments in technology and its products, developments in the global economic system, secularization and the neglect of religion for positive guidance in Africa are some of the factors which have led to the intrusion of human values and a consequent value crisis in modern Africa, as else where.
- (vi) That what is required is “values-rejuvenation” or “values-revitalization” through a process of cultural self-regeneration.
- (vii) That in Africa the process of cultural self-regeneration requires that we go back to African religion for moral guidance, with a commitment to *righteousness*. On this point our advocacy is a humanistic religion of righteousness. We have also argued that we return to the “school of love and peace”, which is the family, from where we ought to learn the time tested values which guarantee, the social order required for our collective and individual preservation and survival.

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