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## *Formulating the Question*

This book asks a clear question: how do values and value commitments arise? And it seeks to supply an equally clear answer to this question: values arise in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence.

However, the precise meaning of this answer, even that of the question, as well as the urgency of this question, are perhaps not immediately obvious. The concepts employed in both question and answer are not clearly defined – neither in philosophy and the social sciences, nor in the wider public debate about values; they are, in fact, extremely difficult to determine and are often essentially contested. It might be asked: what exactly is a value, for instance, and what is the relationship between values and value commitments? Is the concept of ‘value’ still an acceptable philosophical concept today at all – or is the public debate about values hopelessly old-fashioned, lagging behind more contemporary issues in philosophy? Can the concept of value remain a key concept in the social sciences once we have recognized the difficulties in operationalizing it for empirical research? Or would it be better simply to replace it with other concepts which better correspond to the methods of various branches of research, concepts such as ‘attitude’, ‘practices’ or ‘culture’? What actually is the relationship between ‘values’ and ‘norms’, categories which are frequently used as if they were interchangeable?

If my initial question can hence be shown to rest upon numerous tacit and possibly problematic assumptions – or to be not as urgent as I presume – then my answer must expect an even rougher ride. The concept of the ‘self’ used in such formulations as ‘self-formation’ or ‘self-transcendence’ belongs without a doubt to the vocabulary of the

empirical social sciences, ever since it was introduced at the end of the nineteenth century by American thinkers such as William James, Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead. This conception of the personality and its development also represents for me personally – as this book will make clear – one of the greatest discoveries in the history of the social sciences, and doubtless marks a real theoretical advance. Nevertheless, it cannot, unfortunately, be claimed that this concept is wholly free from controversy either, and that all contemporary schools of thought are aware of its logical implications or empirical consequences. But while it is still true that the process of self-formation is universally accepted as the object of study in social psychology and pedagogy (usually known in sociology as the study of socialization processes), the other term, ‘self-transcendence’, unquestionably arouses scepticism in secular and rationalist minds. This is because it sounds religious, mystical or even esoteric as soon as it is taken to mean more than mere altruism and the moral willingness, at least occasionally, to sacrifice individual interests in favour of collective or ‘higher’ goals.

Intellectual states of affairs in which the meaning of key concepts necessary for the expression of cultural self-understanding is either contested or unstable make hermeneutic efforts, in addition to empirical work, unavoidable. Even if it is our goal to arrive at clear-cut explanations, we cannot presume that the concepts we employ will always be understood in the way we intended. We are therefore forced to move to and fro between competing conceptual frameworks, probing and penetrating each of them, making each reciprocally permeable. We shall have to be on the look-out for old answers. At the same time, we must recall the kinds of questions to which these answers were once given, and reflect anew upon old solutions in the light of new problems. The following discussion is, therefore, a deliberate combination of conceptual analysis, of philosophical and sociological textual interpretation, as well as of efforts to describe empirically the cultural predicament of important Western societies.

The question of the genesis of values is a problem which urgently requires clarification, as much within the wider public debate as within specialized academic theory construction. In all Western societies today, serious discussions are now taking place about the shift in, and loss of, values, the opportunities and dangers which such processes present, and the necessity of either reviving old values or searching for new ones. The results of empirical sociological research leave little doubt that so-called ‘postmaterialistic’ values have gained ground during the last decades in the highly developed Western societies. Accordingly, non-instrumental value orientations, which

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declare as desirable goals aesthetic creativity, individual self-realization and the protection of the environment from human despoliation, have, at least in the younger generations, increasingly replaced traditional attitudes to work and the attainment of material security. What was analysed above all by Ronald Inglehart and others in his wake by means of quantitative methods of empirical social research has also been corroborated by qualitative investigations.<sup>1</sup> One such original investigation focused on the children of those surveyed in the 1950s as the basis for a classic study of the psychological make-up of the 'Organization Man', the employee in large organizations.<sup>2</sup> The results revealed spectacular differences between both generations of one and the same family. Whilst the fathers devoted themselves entirely to their careers, restricting all non-instrumental impulses to their private lives – where, however, life also had to be lived within the narrow framework of social conformity to the neighbours' expectations – their sons (and daughters) attempt to find a highly individual lifestyle, where the line between work and leisure is less sharply drawn. They desire a career which either permits individual, creative self-realization within the profession itself or within the pattern of life as a whole.

Of course, these findings do not themselves furnish a complete explanation for the change in values. Serious objections have been raised against the too simplistic linkage of economic well-being with changing values that is assumed in many accounts.<sup>3</sup> It is by no means always true that, during times of material scarcity, materialistic and instrumental value orientations have always and everywhere predominated. Nor does the triumph of postmaterialistic values exclude the possibility of a swift return to materialistic values in periods when material comfort is threatened. The thesis of the change in values refers to a phenomenon of aggregation, and it is quite unclear at the level of the individual whether any one person actually gives precedence to postmaterialistic values or only assumes that his material needs are sufficiently and securely satisfied. What is certain, however, is that this shift in values presupposes a background of economic and legal stability. Without employment, or without the opportunity of democratic participation, it is certainly more difficult and less usual to orient oneself to postmaterialistic values.

Not only the causes but also the effects of this change in values have yet to be fully explained. Depending on the value-standpoint, the consequences of a postmaterialistic orientation for behaviour in the labour market or in politics have been variously assessed. A more unanimous conclusion is usually reached when a loss of values, rather than a mere change in values, is at issue. Ever since the French

sociologist Émile Durkheim developed his concept of 'anomie' at the end of the nineteenth century, the social sciences have quite rightly distinguished between a change in values on the one hand, and a loss of values or a weakening of their binding force on the other. Whilst a change in values can be variously interpreted – either optimistically or pessimistically – a loss of values can only be perceived as a symptom of crisis. Certainly, those phenomena which both the public and the social sciences usually explain by the thesis of the loss of values are evaluated as thoroughly negative. These phenomena include the decay of family ties, the neglect or vandalizing of public spaces, addiction, and, in particular, apparently unmotivated acts of violence, especially those committed by juveniles, which go far beyond the logic of ends and means. Here, sociological studies also often suggest taking as a starting-point the corrosive effects of societal processes on values. Once again, though, the identification of these processes is usually already controversial in the extreme. Whilst some place negative emphasis on the effects of the market economy and capitalism, others point to the influence of a liberal upbringing and the loss of both role models and the courage to demand discipline.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, sociological diagnoses often have profound consequences for the intensive public discussions. The parched soil of the public thirstily absorbs the analyses proffered by the social sciences on the subject of the change in and loss of values. But when it comes to dealing with the consequences of this change in or loss of values, the public feels that it has been left in the lurch by science. This disappointment is inevitable if the ethos of value-freedom in the sciences means that they can only diagnose, but not treat the symptoms. This abstinence from value in the social sciences, and often in philosophy as well, nevertheless opens up the space – or rather the gap in the market – for superficial syntheses or even a merely strategic handling of the public's unsatisfied needs. Books written by political and social commentators on the subject of 'values', from *Der Ehrliche ist der Dumme* to *Values Matter Most* and *Petit traité des grandes vertus*, have been published with great success in the leading Western societies.<sup>5</sup> For some time now, conservative politicians in particular have also demanded a 'spiritual and moral change of heart' (Helmut Kohl), a return to 'family values' (Dan Quayle) or a 'back to basics' approach (John Major). In political rhetoric at least, 'values' have assumed a fundamental importance – even if it is often only to call into question the moral qualities of political adversaries and underscore the integrity of one's own leadership. Stage-managed and increasingly frequent scandals have replaced issue-based political debates, including the debate about values. This can instil in the electorate a cynicism *vis-à-*

*vis* the entire 'political class', and frustration with the politicians leads to political frustration as such. During the three decades which have passed since the great social upheavals of the 1960s, it might have seemed as if the political debate about values was ideological ground occupied entirely by conservatives. This was to change radically in the United States under the influence of the so-called communitarianism debate.<sup>6</sup> In it, leading intellectuals argued that a defence or resuscitation of community-based values was necessary in order to halt the march of individualism in all its forms (utilitarian, obsessed with individual rights or centred on the notion of aesthetic self-realization), and that such 'communitarian' values can also be the prerequisite for political goals like the protection and expansion of the welfare state, goals more commonly associated with the 'Left'. Accordingly, though this discussion did not attempt to declare the Left-Right schema in politics obsolete, it circumvented it in a number of policy areas, or dismantled traditional polarizations. The legacy of the 1960s was evaluated ambivalently here: greater democratization had been achieved, but hedonistic-individualistic tendencies had also been strengthened. The influence of this American discussion on the different camps of European politics has varied from country to country. Here and there, in the politics of the British Labour Party, for example, it has had a significant impact.

Although, therefore, an increasing number of people take seriously and support a politics of values, the answer to the question as to how a stronger commitment to (old or new) values is actually supposed to come about, indeed, how value commitment arises at all, is still wholly lacking in the public debate. Wide-ranging agreement has only been reached in a negative respect: that values cannot be produced rationally or disseminated through indoctrination. Ulrich Wickert has said: 'Values can neither be stolen nor transferred nor bought on credit. A purpose in life and obligations to the community cannot be simply prescribed.'<sup>7</sup> Value commitments clearly do not arise from conscious intentions, and yet we experience the feeling of 'I can do no other' which accompanies a strong value commitment not as a restriction, but as the highest expression of our free will.<sup>8</sup> Without wishing to provide a compendium of tried and tested advice for politicians or educators, this book can be understood itself as a contribution to the fundamental resolution of this question: from what experiences does this apparently paradoxical feeling of an inelible, and yet voluntary, commitment to values result?

Three kinds of objections are regularly raised, though, when this question is introduced into a discussion; without being able to do full

justice to these objections right at the beginning of my argument, I shall nevertheless briefly outline them in order to bring the question into sharper focus. There are, first of all, viewpoints from which a debate about values and the genesis of value commitments seems superfluous, because human action *per se* and its value orientations are credited with only a minor influence on the course of socio-historic processes. These include radical materialist approaches as well as extreme functionalist theories. The former are, though, if I am not mistaken, rarely endorsed nowadays. In Marxist-influenced circles there is even a great willingness to concede at least a limited autonomy to the cultural forming of human action and institutions. Sociologically, it seems clear to me that the discourse about values must become more intensive the less it is thought that political attitudes or social movements result quasi-automatically from material interests or resources. If we consider, say, ecological movements or waves of religious revival, we see that these certainly do not take place in a space wholly free of interests and independent of resources. But that does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that we may attribute a value-oriented character to them only in the sense that movements can develop, after passing through many stages of escalation, a fundamentally alternative value orientation. A radical shift in value orientation can, rather, be *constitutive* of them. Such a constitutive shift in value orientation certainly does not arise by mere coincidence, either. To explain its genesis, or at least its distribution, we can often cite social structural conditions which first prompted the search for a reinterpretation of the principles justifying a prevailing status hierarchy. But the question of the availability of alternative values, of the affinity of certain belief systems for social structural change and of the conditions for 'ideological' innovation, leads back to the irreducible character of the cultural, even in such materialistically influenced diagnoses.<sup>9</sup>

The other variant of an analysis which deliberately ignores or reduces value orientations is the extreme functionalism represented above all by Niklas Luhmann. Though cultural 'codes' and cultural 'subsystems' very much exist according to this viewpoint, they do so only in the sense that functional principles in law, science, art, education, religion, politics or economics are each governed by their own meaning. With a gentle smile, Luhmann shelves the notion still entertained by his predecessors in the functionalist tradition that it was precisely cultural values which offered the opportunity to step back from the functional principles of the individual subsystems and to represent the whole. He maintains that functional differentiation is the principle of societal organization and historical development so

resolutely that every argument which claims for it only limited scope appears nostalgic. This is not the place for a thorough rebuttal of this total affirmation of modernity as functional differentiation. Suffice to say that the basic premise, namely, that societal domains are organized systemically and according to a logic of functional differentiation, is not, by any means, advanced with empirical arguments, or even in a manner that takes account of empirical reality; it is, rather, an a priori postulation. Serious objections, however, can be raised against this and the logic of functional argumentation and explanation as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

The second kind of sceptical objections raised against the whole discussion about values originates in a completely different point of view. The suspicion harboured by some liberal and postmodern critics here is that every discourse about values represents an attempt to impose values on others. Yet within the modern, culturally highly diverse, pluralistic and often increasingly multicultural social order in particular, they claim, any attempt to reduce difference by means of a value discourse is not only condemned to failure, but is also dangerous. Any attempt to make a certain value system obligatory would be more likely to provoke counter-movements than achieve its goal without encountering resistance. But if the various milieux and sub-cultures of a society insist on their particular values, this would lead to a potentially violent 'Balkanization' of domestic political argument. In contrast, the liberals prefer the orientation of all to value-free procedures of peaceful co-operation and communication; and the postmodernists an ethos of respect for difference and all-inclusive tolerance. But the aforementioned debate about communitarianism, as well as the debate about the ethical implications of the 'postmodern',<sup>11</sup> has made it clear that a simple polarization of the advocates and opponents of a value discourse does not do justice to the matter under discussion. The liberals must ask themselves whether the value of the value-free procedures they favour must not at least be consensually shared and internalized as value; and the postmodernists cannot avoid portraying tolerance of and respect for the Other itself as utterly non-relativizable value-contents. This is not to say that, with a wave of the hand, we can dismiss as invalid the doubts expressed by both the liberal and postmodernist camps. All I wish to stress for the time being is that their scepticism does not offer sufficient grounds for ignoring the question we are pursuing here. I shall propose one possible way of bringing together the 'good' and the 'right' which evades these sceptical objections in the concluding chapter of this book.

At this point, however, I want to move on to discuss and actually to repudiate a third objection. This objection seeks to dispute the

significance of the values discussion in an age in which there is complete uncertainty about values. Of prime importance for the assumption that we live in such an age is again the postmodernist thesis that the great framing narratives postulated by the philosophy of history have collapsed.<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Bauman in particular has earnestly undertaken the (possibly paradoxical) attempt to search for an ethics for the age of complete uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> His 'postmodern ethics' is the ethics for just such an age, an age in which awareness of the uncertainty about the foundations of values has become inevitable. His search leads him to Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy of the Other as the 'unfounded foundation' of moral impulses, and he guides us from society as a 'factory of morality' to the 'presocietal sources of morality'. With all due respect to this attempt, I would like nevertheless to express some reservations as to whether the initial diagnosis is correct and the solution practicable. The thesis of the end of the metanarratives rightly marks the exhaustion of teleological and evolutionistic philosophies of history and their implausibility in the face of twentieth-century reality. But this thesis itself represents a metanarrative which claims to describe an irreversible, epochal turning-point. If we are willing to follow this reflexive turn, then we see that the abandonment of teleological and evolutionistic interpretations of history does not spare us the effort of placing ourselves in an historically reflective relationship to the origin of our ideals and to the fate of their realization. A limited justification for teleological or evolutionistic ways of thinking then becomes perfectly possible. Then, again, we cannot be certain that we have entered an age of complete uncertainty and that there will never again be traces of new certainty. Even Nietzsche's dictum about the 'death of God' must not be taken then as a positive truth.

Nor should we misconstrue Bauman's diagnosis of the end of all certainty as an empirical thesis concerning the spread of doubt about values among the populations of Western societies. Even the most dedicated advocate of the uncertainty thesis will not dispute that many people continue to feel absolutely secure in their particular values and react to their violation with intense outrage. But this has always been – again since Émile Durkheim – the surest sociological indicator of the actual validity of values. From the viewpoint of this unavowed philosophy of history with its claim that we have reached the end of certainty, however, empirically ascertainable value-security makes it look as if the news that there is no longer any certainty simply has yet to reach everyone. Can we really interpret subjective value-certainty today as a sign of ignorance or as the expression of an historically inadequate consciousness? Would this not be an even



worse elitism than that represented by those intellectuals who claimed a privileged insight into the logic of history?

There is also another possible way of dealing with the discrepancy between widespread subjective value-certainty and the modern uncertainty about the foundation of values. In one of the most sensational American books of the 1980s to diagnose contemporary society, the authors report their findings from a number of interviews in which they asked people to justify values that they obviously endorsed. The reactions which they encountered often expressed helplessness, and anger at this very helplessness. Thus, one interviewee replied to the attempts to get him to justify why honesty was good and lying bad in the following way: 'I don't know. It just is. It's just so basic. I don't want to be bothered with challenging that. It's part of me. I don't know where it came from, but it's very important.'<sup>14</sup> Robert Bellah's group of authors interprets the inability to justify value-security contained in this answer as indicative of the loss of a common language which makes such justification easier. Evidently, the interviewee could not appeal to the Ten Commandments of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and assume that both he and his interlocutor were agreed on the validity of such divinely revealed commandments. Nor does he have at his disposal a secular vocabulary of rational moral justification (Kant's moral philosophy, for example) to defend the value of honesty. But if there are no shared tacit assumptions underlying a discourse, then every justification claim only leads to deeper disagreement, or makes necessary complicated intellectual constructions which often overtax the individual. In that case, we would establish not a lack of value-certainty, but a lack of communal, self-evident truths.

But perhaps this too would not be quite the right description of the situation. The group of interviewers obviously does not itself doubt the value of honesty; neither would it like to imply that there is no possibility of justifying this value. Perhaps there are today not only a great many separate individuals who are absolutely certain of their values; perhaps the thesis of the end of all certainty also underestimates the extent to which there is consensus on values in our societies. Individual rights to freedom, conceptions of justice, the rejection of physical violence – all can in any case reckon with widespread approval. Though fundamental conflicts of values – about the right to abortion, for example – do exist, these do not represent a loss of all common vocabulary.<sup>15</sup> If this is true, then this collective certainty even contrasts with the picture painted of supposed uncertainty. Then we must not only seek to understand why individuals, but even entire modern societies, find it so difficult to articulate their values and to

justify them in this articulation. The inadequacy of their self-description, which for the Bellah group results from the prevalence of individualistic 'languages', is then not to be corrected by ensuring that everyone receives the news of uncertainty, but by revising the way we reflect on the foundations of our experience of value.

Precisely this is the fundamental goal of this book. It does not aim to propagate particular values and to appeal for their reinforcement – although I am quite prepared to admit that certain of my own value orientations and concerns have motivated me to write this book. My intention is, rather, to look out for those action contexts and types of experience in which the subjective feeling that something is a value has its origin. And I am concerned with making available the appropriate theoretical tools to describe these experiences. I take it we are all familiar with the feeling that something evidently and in an emotionally intense way is to be evaluated as good or bad. Though we may often judge something valuable with our intellect, without at the same time experiencing strong feelings, this does not mean that there are not certain values which are deeply rooted in our emotional life. Though we may believe that we should be able to justify our value orientations – and justifying and discussing may themselves be an important value for us – this does not mean that we actually obtained our values through processes of justification and discussion, and that we would discard them should their justification prove difficult. The expositions contained in this book serve to draw us closer to that centre of human experience in which values originate for us.

These expositions are necessary because neither present-day philosophy nor sociology has ready a convincing proposal with which to answer the question we are addressing here. In this respect, things were once much better. I argue that, between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s, a whole series of important thinkers was aware of this question; their answers, even if they may often have been one-sided or misleading, are definitely worth recalling. A large part of this book, therefore, consists first of all in just such a searching recollection, beginning with a brief look back at that thinker who first posed the question of the genesis of values in the sense intended here: Friedrich Nietzsche. In doing so, the reason why this question neither needed to be, nor could be, raised before him must be made clear. While appreciating the intellectual audacity which inspired him to take this step, I take issue with the misleading answer he supplied to his own question. Yet, as misleading, indeed downright mistaken, as the answer he expounded chiefly in *On the Genealogy of Morality* is, it left

a deep impression on this aspect of subsequent German and European intellectual history.

In contrast, it went almost unnoticed that one of Nietzsche's contemporaries on the other side of the Atlantic was no less radical in his questioning, but at the same time developed a far more fruitful answer. I shall therefore deal with him extensively – with the American pragmatist William James, and above all with his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James distinguished sharply between 'religion' and 'morality'. For him, religion is not a kind of hypermorality, an intensification of self-control; it is based, rather, on experiences of self-surrender. However, he analyses these experiences with exclusive reference to individuals 'in their solitude'. Both the empirical substance and the theoretical means of James's answer will serve as a foil for the subsequent interpretations. Despite its significance in pointing the way forward, his theory is still, I argue, somewhat one-sided from an empirical point of view and also possesses theoretical inadequacies. After James, therefore, I shall analyse writings by Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Max Scheler and John Dewey mainly on the theory of religion. Although these writings, and thus my subsequent interpretations of them, are mostly concerned with religion, my claims are in each case directed at the problem of value commitment in general – and not only at religious value commitments. In his study of archaic religiosity, Durkheim opposed James's individualism with an equally radical collectivism, deriving the genesis of values from the ecstatic states of collectives. But he lacked the conceptual means necessary to appreciate the interpretation of experience and the possibility of a process of identity formation in which the individual disassociates himself from the collective. In his later metaphysical works, Georg Simmel attempted to grasp the self-transcendence of life using the language of *Lebensphilosophie* and with it to explain the genesis of values. Max Scheler combines a highly suggestive phenomenology of value-sensations with the ambitious and problematic attempt to establish a non-formal ethics of value. John Dewey reflects on intersubjective experiences in which the boundaries of one's self open up in relation to others, to oneself, to nature and to God. We can glean from all these thinkers important empirical suggestions for a rich phenomenology of value-experiences, as well as theoretical means for understanding them. I shall conclude that John Dewey, who was, like James, a representative of American pragmatism, has been the most vigorous in pointing the way towards the possibility of theoretical integration, and thus to a consistent answer to the question of the genesis of values – though with him, too, this accomplishment is distorted by a time-bound and probably untenable message:

a sacralization of democracy. Although these attempts at recollection make no claims to exhaustiveness, an answer to the question I have posed does indeed begin to emerge.

In order to bring the question into still sharper focus, I shall move on to discuss the contemporary thinker who has been the most consistent in dealing with the question of the genesis of values: Charles Taylor. I argue, indeed, that this question was suppressed from the 1930s onwards and to a large extent forgotten. The merits and limits of Taylor's work must therefore be outlined before my own answer – that values and value commitments arise in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence – can be adequately formulated. To this end, moreover, I discuss in a separate chapter, which deals above all with the work of Richard Rorty, the question whether the concept of the self (or ego-identity) is still tenable at all in the face of its postmodern challenge. If I am successful in proving that it is, then the last stage of my argument will show how this thesis about the genesis of values can be integrated with ideas about a universalistic morality that have a completely different underpinning. This proposal, which I develop primarily from pragmatist suggestions, is then finally confronted with the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas. From this confrontation there arises the prospect of mediating between liberalism and communitarianism.

The theoretical contribution presented here of course corresponds to various empirical attempts (including my own) to discover which values in which societies are at present rooted in living traditions, and what the chances are of value-oriented movements going beyond an individualism oriented towards utility, rights or self-realization and articulating a contemporary meaning of the ideals of mutuality, solidarity, fraternity and charity. But the present contribution is itself neither a sociological diagnosis of contemporary society, nor part of an historical sociology of values. Its aim is, rather, to clarify a question which, situated on an anthropological level, is mostly overlooked, rather than answered, by empirical research.

Without furnishing either proof or explanation, I have repeatedly maintained that the question of the genesis of values was neglected during the period after the Second World War. If it should be possible to verify this assertion, its explanation seems to me to lie in the dominance of the belief in progress during the age of the 'brief dream of everlasting prosperity' (Burkart Lutz). If history itself is conceived as a largely automatic process of modernization (as in the academic social sciences) or as a law-bound progression towards socialism (as with the Marxists), then values are so deeply embedded in the

postulated historical trends that their separability from this history, their perspectivism and the fragility of their realization become completely inconceivable. We can see quite clearly how important post-war schools of thought grew out of highly value-related impulses of the pre-war period, but then endeavoured to emancipate themselves from their value-related origins and to give the impression of their being a constantly advancing, professionalized solution to purely scientific problems.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for example, the investigation of everyday language use in 'ordinary language philosophy' sprang from the profoundly ethical ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein; or, in sociology and political science, a mechanistic systems theory expressing quasi-behaviourist assumptions about human action issued from Talcott Parsons's critique of utilitarianism. Even so, a social science endorsing a value-free procedure may seem less surprising than a philosophy which has little interest in the realm of values and which endeavours to find a neutral metaposition even when dealing with ethical questions.

I do not wish at this point to provide further proof of philosophy's neglect of the question of the genesis of values; what is lacking here will to some extent be made good in the chapter on Charles Taylor, who represents the most significant exception to this rule. What I shall do here, however, is set forth in more detail the inadequacy of the contributions of rival sociological theories to this issue. In doing so, the non-specialist reader cannot be spared a few difficulties; but this effort may be rewarded in so far as this critical discussion simultaneously pursues the goal of circumscribing the concept of value in its surrounding conceptual field before the properly constructive discussion begins.

For one hundred years, and thus since the birth of the academic discipline of sociology, a permanent gulf has divided those who, mainly influenced by economics, view human action as the pursuit of self-advantage or clear interests, or at the very least stable and largely context-independent preferences, and those who emphasize the irreducible character of the normative dimension of human action. The controversy between 'utilitarians' and 'normativists' runs through the entire theoretical development of this discipline, although that does not mean that there have been no attempts to synthesize the rival directions or to find a third way. It is my thesis that both sides on the front-line between utilitarianism and normativism – at least in their previous and present forms – have the greatest difficulties in analysing the genesis of values (and norms). To consider these difficulties is instructive for understanding the problem we are dealing with here, as well as showing that this book is justified in not starting from either

of these two positions, but rather from old and new contributions which rise above this controversy.

For a long time those approaches which I have labelled utilitarian did *not* attempt at all to explain the origin of values and norms. Values were either assumed to be simply self-evident – in the sense, for example, that all action could be conceived as a striving for private and instrumental goods – or they were conceived as completely exogenous, as lying outside the area of interests, so that economic theory and also – if obviously with less justification – sociological and psychological theories could simply abstract from their genesis, or view them as conditioned by nature or varying by chance. Today, this time is clearly past, and the calls urging an examination of the distinctive features and the genesis of values and norms echo everywhere – not only amongst the critics of the utilitarian approaches, but also amongst their champions. But all their attempts suffer, as I shall demonstrate, from the restrictive character of their initial premises. Admittedly, advocates of utilitarianism no longer declare the plurality of values to be illusory as opposed to the harsh reality of the universal orientation to utility or rationality; nor do they declare the question of the genesis of values to be irrelevant. They are forced, however, to explain the genesis of values with a theory whose unifying core consists precisely of certain restrictive assumptions about the role of values in human action. How can a theory which emphasizes the individual (or collective) optimization of utility calculations explain not only the behaviour of persons in accordance with given rules, but also the genesis of such rules, and of values which go beyond mere rules?

As examples let us take two respected and discriminating representatives of the 'utilitarian' approach: James Coleman and his attempt to explain the 'emergence of norms',<sup>17</sup> and Michael Hechter and his survey of explanations of the genesis of values.<sup>18</sup> Coleman first of all cleverly divides the problem into two subproblems. On the one hand, he wants to explain the origin of a demand for norms and, on the other, the satisfaction of this demand by the realization of effective norms. In his account of the need for norms he shows that an 'action that has externalities generates interests in the action among those actors who experience the externalities', and that these externalities frequently 'cannot be overcome by simple transactions that would put control of the action in the hands of those experiencing the externalities'. Many of Coleman's predecessors have been more or less satisfied with inferring the genesis of norms from a situation that requires normative regulation<sup>19</sup> – but this is self-evidently inadmissible, since the demand for regulation is by no means satisfied everywhere it

arises, and since norms by no means exist only where a normative demand for regulation prevails in the manner described. Coleman, however, does not succumb to this error.

He goes one step further and turns directly to specifying the conditions under which the need is actually satisfied – namely, when (in his terminology) ‘beneficiaries of a norm, acting rationally, either will be able to share appropriately the costs of sanctioning the target actors or will be able to generate second-order sanctions among the set of beneficiaries that are sufficient to induce effective sanctions of the target actors by one or more of the beneficiaries.’ In my opinion, we have here an admirably clear demonstration of the fact that norms *can* arise even when we operate with the premise of exclusively rational action. This demonstration represents an advance in so far as this fact was questioned by normativist critics of utilitarianism. What Coleman’s argument does not establish, however, is that this is indeed the most plausible explanation of the genesis of norms in general. The proof that a need for normative regulation and its satisfaction can be explained, even with a model of action that initially turns a blind eye to the normative, does not permit us to rule out the possibility that further plausible hypotheses about the genesis of norms, and ones which are more frequently accurate from an empirical point of view, could be constructed using a model of action that takes the normative dimension more fully into account from the very beginning.

There is a further difficulty. Coleman restricts himself to the thematics of the genesis of norms; he does not comment on the genesis of ‘values’. This would be unproblematic only if we were able to use both of these terms interchangeably, or if the explanation of the one entailed the other. But this is anything but self-evident, as becomes immediately clear in the terminology used by the other representative of utilitarian thought we shall discuss here.

Michael Hechter addresses the problem of values directly. He defines values as ‘relatively general and durable internal criteria for evaluation’ and distinguishes them from preferences, which he describes as ‘labile rather than durable, and particular rather than general’. He distinguishes norms from values *and* preferences, because they are said to be external – and not internal – to the actor and require sanctioning for their effectiveness. He lists the bewilderingly large number of ways in which values can apparently arise, and includes among these biological conditions, processes of institutionalization and personal experiences. Ultimately, he concludes that all of these factors somehow combine together: ‘All told, for any individual, some values are selected biologically . . . , some are the by-product of

the physical and institutional environments, and the rest are the by-product of personal history.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, this explanation does not sound like a particularly convincing theory.

But another point is of greater interest here. When Hechter cites natural selection as one of the sources of value-genesis and explicitly applies the concept of value to animals as well, it becomes immediately clear that he employs this concept in a specific and not unproblematic way. Though values are for him more durable and more general than preferences, they do not reside on an entirely different logical level from them.

At this point, it might be asked why we require two separate terms if the distinction between values and preferences is, so to speak, only a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, one. However, what is important is that this terminology seems to me to conflict with ordinary language use. We are all familiar with the discrepancy between 'values' and 'preferences', not only in the sense of a difference between short-term and long-term goals, but in the deeper sense that we do not experience some of our desires as good or, conversely, that we do not succeed in making something we evaluate as good into a vital desire in our lives. 'Values' evaluate our 'preferences'. In the dimension of values, we take up a position towards ourselves as well. Of course Hechter is right when he ascribes long-term and stable orientations to animals as well as to humans, but do we really want to accept that animals – like humans – have the ability to relate reflectively and evaluatively to their preferences? This would in any case require a more sophisticated argument than the one he offers us. If a fundamental anthropological difference should exist, however, it would then be crucial to separate the question of the genesis of values clearly from that of the genesis of our desires and preferences. At issue would then be the question of how reflective standards according to which we evaluate the evaluations embodied in our desires can actually arise.

A preliminary result of these considerations is, then, that the question of the genesis of values ought to be clearly separated from that of the genesis of norms and that of the genesis of preferences and desires. The contributions of the leading 'utilitarian' theorists, however, overlook these distinctions in one way or another. They are, therefore, irrespective of how persuasive their accounts of the genesis of norms or desires are, unsatisfactory for the question of the genesis of values.

It would not conform to this book's methodology if at this point I were to determine my own alternative definitions in advance. Problems are not going to be solved by acts of definition at this stage of



the argument; the determination of the concepts does not lie at the beginning, but rather at the end, of the path of reflection which lies before us. All I want to do here is draw attention to some points where distinctions could be important.

Perhaps, however, these problems resolve themselves if we turn to the 'normativist' alternative to utilitarianism. Indisputably, its most important representative in the sociology of the last few decades was Talcott Parsons. In his work – in his critique of utilitarianism, as well as in his constructive work – the concept of 'value' was always one of the key categories, perhaps even the central category itself. I do not want to furnish detailed proof of this here.<sup>21</sup> Parsons and his school certainly had a clear notion that values do not express desires, but instead imply what is worth desiring – and this difference they describe as a customary view in the history of ideas. 'A value is not just a preference but is a preference which is felt and/or considered to be justified.'<sup>22</sup> Parsons also clearly distinguishes values and norms. Whereas Hechter describes norms as something external to the actor, Parsons, under the influence of Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and George Herbert Mead, is especially interested in their internalization – in the processes through which initially external expectations of conduct become components of a person's inner life. For this reason, Parsons could never define the distinction between norms and values as one between external and internal points of orientation. Norms are for him specifications of general cultural values in response to particular action situations. The action orientations of concrete actors result from internalized values.

Although values, norms and desires are thereby distinguished from one another with acceptable clarity, this now gives rise to the impression that the three levels are related to one another like the levels of a hierarchy. According to this theory, the general cultural value system forms the moral and legal norms through processes of institutionalization; through processes of internalization, it also forms the structures of persons by shaping vague and plastic biological dispositions into object-oriented drive structures. Although a possible failure of these processes is certainly taken into account, tensions between the levels appear to be ruled out in principle. A whole lot of Parsons's critics from various camps have focused on this point. Thus, within the Parsons school it soon became obvious that the theory – despite all the emphasis which it places on the role of values in human action – actually contributes nothing to the question of how values are actually 'applied' in concrete action situations. The question arose as to whether actors are really only the puppets of cultural

values<sup>23</sup> – or whether, in the dynamics of everyday situations, it is not rather the case that vague values must always first be translated by individual effort into concrete orientations, balanced with other considerations and possibly revised on the basis of the consequences of actions. A further objection stems from the influence cultural anthropologists and historians have had on sociology.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, Parsons does not in his work ascertain ‘values’ through deep hermeneutic penetration into cultures, nor does he represent them in terms of a ‘thick description’ of their nature (Clifford Geertz); they are analytic constructs abstracted from a culture as a whole and then designated as responsible for concrete actions. This objection not only argues that it is necessary to work with better empirical methods than those employed by Parsons if we are to discover the values which really orient action, thereby dispelling the scepticism resulting from the difficulties in making the central theoretical concept of ‘value’ productive in empirical work. The objection also denies, from a theoretical point of view, that values have a separate mode of existence, completely detached from the other ways in which we relate to the world, like our cognitive relation to objects or our self-reflection. The concept of ‘value’ itself is said to encourage a thinning out of the symbolic patterns and their detachment from the practices in which they become operative.<sup>25</sup> A third objection, finally, might state that Parsons simply never addressed the problem of the genesis of values.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, he speaks from the perspective of universal history of the fundamental innovations in values during, say, the Reformation; likewise, generalization belongs to the most important dimensions of the social change he assumes to take place in modernity. But value generalization is of course not innovation, and those innovations which Parsons analyses are in his theory stages in an evolutionistic, historical process which admits no openness in principle.

For this reason, even this brief journey around the normativist position raises more questions than it provides answers. Self-critical representatives of this school endeavour to eliminate the recognized shortcomings, as do empirical cultural sociologists. But hitherto this has no more given rise to an actual synthesis than those writings which cannot be described either as utilitarian or normativist.<sup>27</sup> Without actually having proved this here, the foregoing arguments may nevertheless have made plausible the idea that the answer to the question of the genesis of values is bound up with a revision in our understanding of human action. It is my conviction that only an appreciation of the creativity of human action can explain the genesis of values over and against the restricted utilitarian and normativist understanding of action. The distinction between values, norms and

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desires; the clarification of their respective role in the dynamics of human action; the elucidation of the relationship of our evaluative orientation to the world to other ways in which we understand the world and ourselves – these are tasks which lie before us on this path. The following discussions attempt to take a few steps down this path. The first step involves turning back to that point in the history of ideas when the question of genesis of values was first posed in all its radicalness.