



# Value and virtue

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## Abstract

This article offers suggestions for situating value in the liberal economic sense with respect to values understood in a broader, ethical sense. It is a conceptual exercise in bringing together ideas about value, which pertain largely to objects, with ethical ideas of virtue, which concern acts and character. I argue that economic value and ethical value are incommensurable insofar as the former deals with ostensibly relative, commensurable values and the latter with ostensibly absolute and incommensurable ones. The articulation of incommensurable values is better expressed as acts or practices of judgment rather than of choice. I suggest that sacrifice may be a site where meta-value is established.

## Key Words

commensurability • ethics • happiness • judgment • practice • sacrifice • value • virtue

To go to the slaughter is always the same sacrifice for the ox; this is no reason for beef to have a constant value.

(Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1971: 127)

As this article is going to be rather abstract, I begin close to the ground. In a recent article, Andrew Walsh (2004) discusses the puzzlement of Malagasy sapphire traders concerning the value of the uncut and ugly stones they extract from the earth. Perhaps nothing better than gem stones illustrates the arbitrariness of value and the curious effects (and machinations) of supply and demand crossed with ideas of display and concealment. Although without much ostensible use value – and certainly none for the Malagasy miners and petty traders – sapphires are part of the world of goods. In economics, goods get compared with one another, but why should goods be accorded the primary site of tokens of value in the first place? What about deeds, practices, powers, or human capacities? What values exist to contextualize the value of goods?

My article attempts to face theories of value with insights drawn from the field of ethics, articulated here as the relationship of value to virtue. I make two, possibly contradictory arguments. First, it does not make sense to talk about value without virtue, or vice versa, especially if one understands value as a function of acts rather than simply of

objects.<sup>1</sup> Second, it is dangerous to conflate value and virtue. I leave open a definition of 'value'. By 'virtue' I wish to signal that the article concerns ethical value as much as it does material or economic value and that my approach to ethics is drawn largely from an Aristotelian version of moral philosophy. In particular, if attention to the ethical component or dimension of value moves us from a consideration of objects to acts, virtue ethics moves beyond acts (making choices, following rules) to persons or character; it shifts the focus from having, to doing, to being. Virtue ethics asks not how we can acquire objects of value nor how we can do what is absolutely right, but how we should live and what kind of person we want to *be*. I take the latter to be significant human questions, if not specifically anthropological ones, even though I will not necessarily go along with the assumption of Aristotelian virtue ethics that a good life must be a single or unified one. In sum, this article attempts to contribute to the anthropological discussion of value by showing how it is, and asking how it might be further, informed by ethical theory.

I want to make clear from the outset that there is nothing in this argument to support a simple form of ethical relativism. We do not have to agree on the moral value of any particular practice to understand that it is constituted *as* a moral practice, that it is virtuous from someone's perspective or relative to someone's world. In other words, we ought to be able to locate something in the sphere or domain of the moral, as having an ethical quality, without ourselves thereby necessarily either placing a value judgment on it or, conversely, cautiously refusing to do so.

### **ETHICAL AND ECONOMIC VALUE: ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE**

In contemporary society there is seen to be a great rift between ethical value and economic value, the former increasingly subjectivized (at least in some quarters) and the latter by now virtually completely objectivized. It is one of the great merits of David Graeber's book *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* to show that value in the economic sense can be – and has always been – linked to value in both the ethical and the semiotic senses and to bring together Marx and Mauss in this exercise. Indeed, both Marx and Mauss – and one should add Weber, Simmel, and Macpherson – have each in their own way supplied an ethical context and critique to conceptions of economic value and rationality as developed under capitalism. At the same time, as each of these thinkers implies, it would be dangerous to produce a model of value that was overly unified; such a theoretical move would (now) risk participating in the neoliberal inclination to subsume ethical value in economic terms. We must preserve another set of values or ideas about value with which to critically appraise the production and expansion of capitalist value.

Whereas the best recent work in the anthropology of value (a Maussian/Marxist tradition developed by Munn and Turner and extended by Graeber, 2001 and others) operates with an ostensibly holistic theory of value (but see Eiss, 2007) I begin by attempting to contextualize values with respect to one another. That is, I emphasize the heterogeneity and incommensurability among distinct values rather than explore the production and circulation of abstract value *per se*. I begin my inspection of 'value' not as an objective entity or mysterious force, nor as an abstract or universal anthropological construct, but with the divide between the idea of 'ethical values' and 'value' in the sense of liberal economics, that is, as 'market value' or 'price'. I hasten to acknowledge that

contemporary economics as well as human practices with money as documented by anthropologists (Maurer, 2006) comprehend more sophisticated and heterogeneous conceptualizations of value than my schematic depiction here.

To argue that there is good reason to keep discussion of ethics, morality, or virtue at arm's length from, or in some tension with, politics and economics is hardly original, but I think it is worth articulating some of the theoretical and empirical rather than specifically moralistic reasons behind it. The first concerns the relationship between ostensibly absolute and relative value. Ethical values, at least in western thought, are generally posited with respect to some absolute standard – the life of the ox for the ox – which, unlike fluctuating economic values – the cost of beef – cannot be negotiated. Economic value, as viewed by liberal economists is intrinsically negotiable and relative; value is a matter of market price. More than this, absolute values cannot be simply substituted for one another. Kant put it this way:

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an *equivalent*; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity. (Kant, 1964 as cited, e.g. by Asad, 2003: 137, n. 21, italics in original)

As Simmel, in particular, showed, money transforms quality into quantity (1978). Ostensibly constant, absolute standards are thereby increasingly at risk of being undermined by regimes of fluctuating and relative value. This is what is understood to happen when the range of commodities is expanded – to include, for example, votes, sex, parenthood, genetic information, or the writing of grants and even ethical protocols by consulting agencies. Commodities, in turn, are reimagined as quality. As the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique* put it, US global hegemony and marketing is 'all based on the principle that *having is being*' (Ramonet, 2000 as cited by Asad, 2003: 152, my emphasis).

In liberal economics value can be measured and its authority has risen since the 19th century when measurement imposed itself as the basis for scientific validity – value – and the means for knowing or expressing things about truth (Menand, 2001). Value thus becomes probabilistic, informed by statistics (Hacking, 1990).<sup>2</sup> The rise of information technology has also supported a conception of knowledge or truth as comprised of decomposable but commensurable bits. Ethical value, perhaps partly in a defensive reaction, has been understood as immeasurable, certain and integral.

Discrete, relative, fluctuating, substitutable, measurable, divisible and probabilistic economic values imply – even, demand – choice; concomitantly, economics is a science built largely on assumptions about choice. Both Marx and Mauss, each in their own way, challenged the foregrounding of choice, showing that it is never as simple or as 'free' as western ideology suggests. Mauss wrote rather in terms of obligation, a word that connotes ethics, as practiced by those in the lineage of Kant and Durkheim. The Maussian gift (1990), with its *obligations* to be given, received and returned, is a precise exemplification of Durkheim's understanding of society as a moral system. However, Bourdieu's subsequent interventions helpfully bring out the underlying strain in Mauss of a very different moral philosophy from either the Kantianism of his uncle or the utilitarianism to which he is most clearly opposed. The latter, of course, is the ethical philosophical position most closely linked to liberal economics.

As Bourdieu (1977) was at pains to point out, the ‘obligations’ to give, receive and return entail neither mechanical acts of rule-following nor simple or maximizing choices. They are neither categorical nor strictly calculative. Practitioners of the gift economy must bring together many considerations. They have to exercise judgment about *how* to fulfill their obligations – how generous to be, how quickly to act, in what manner and so forth. In addition, a point perhaps less recognized by Bourdieu, blanket obligation needs to be broken down with respect to the various kinds of commitments people find themselves having made or having been made for them (as well as to their capacities for fulfilling them). People have to consider how deep the obligation is in any given instance and how to balance it with overlapping or competing obligations. How they act in any given circumstance is part largely shaped by their cultivated dispositions and their particular character as social persons. This is an Aristotelian depiction of the situation.

This is also the conclusion of Knut Myhre (1998) who argues for the Aristotelian substrate in Mauss on the basis of the relationship between means and ends. ‘As a practice where the end is inseparable from the activity, [Mauss’s account of] gift exchange resembles Aristotle’s concept of virtuous action, where the end is immanent in the practice’ (1998: 130). Myhre even conjectures that ‘Mauss’s account of gift exchange is influenced by, if not modeled on, Aristotle’s investigation of virtuous action in the *Nicomachean Ethics*’ (1998: 133).<sup>3</sup>

### **OBLIGATION, CHOICE AND JUDGMENT**

Key words in Kantian, utilitarian, and Aristotelian traditions of moral philosophy are respectively obligation, choice, and judgment. In contrast to the way most anthropologists have seen it, I set up as counterpoint to the concept of choice in economics not obligation, but judgment. I believe it is a good idea to try to keep these concepts – choice and judgment – reasonably distinct, or at least to be very clear when and how they are being articulated.<sup>4</sup> However, it is not immediately evident how to do so. Where they are not clearly distinguished, as perhaps in Bourdieu they are not, ethical practice appears to get subsumed within an agonistics of honor or taste (Lambek, 2000) and an ethical disposition – to do the right thing, to be a good person or to lead a good life – is replaced by narrower instrumental and competitive calculations – to get what one wants and to do so ahead of, or at the expense of others.

Thus, although Bourdieu draws upon Aristotelian practice as opposed to Kantian rule, he presents an analysis that in the end looks more like economics than like either of these ethical traditions. This is because he does not fully absorb the Aristotelian relation of means to ends or the relative weight placed on ‘purposeful activity’ as opposed to ‘the consumption of satisfactions’ (Macpherson, 1973: 5), nor the embedding of virtue in character and practice. For Bourdieu, value is located primarily in the ends rather than the means and continues to be understood as a measure primarily of objects – epitomized in the very term ‘symbolic capital’ – rather than as a quality of acts – virtue – or of actors and lives – character.

When value is understood as inhering to means rather than simply to ends, that is, to acts and practices rather than simply to goals or objects, the problem of scarcity, and hence of competition, becomes less acute. Macpherson argues this point well in his distinction between the maximization of utilities and the maximization of human powers,

that is, [peoples'] potential for using and developing their uniquely human capacities. This claim is based on a view of man's essence not as a consumer of utilities but as a doer, a creator, an enjoyer of his human attributes. These attributes may be variously listed and assessed; they may be taken to include the capacity for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic creation and contemplation, for the emotional activities of friendship and love, and, sometimes, for religious experience. Whatever the uniquely human attributes are taken to be, in this view of man their exertion and deployment are seen as ends in themselves, a satisfaction in themselves, not simply a means to consumer satisfactions. It is better to travel than to arrive. Man is not a bundle of appetites seeking satisfaction but a bundle of conscious energies seeking to be exerted. (1973: 4–5)

I will return to means and ends later.<sup>5</sup>

While the invocation of judgment serves to begin to distinguish an approach that attends to ethical value from one concerned with economic value, it also complicates or undermines making that distinction, as I seemed to do at the beginning of the article, on the grounds that the former is absolute and the latter relative. Or rather, it qualifies what is meant by absolute value or how absolute value appears in practice. Understood as judgment rather than obligation, ethics itself relativizes or at least contextualizes value. Practice emerges through evaluation, the sizing up and fitting of action to circumstance. Yet judgment selects among alternatives not by means of a binary logic of exclusive acceptance or rejection but by balancing among qualities. Such evaluation or judgment is grounded in more general, culturally mediated, understandings of the human condition and the ends of human life as well as those internal to the practice at hand. Contingency solicits what I would call a measured rather than a measurable response.

My point here can be illustrated from another direction. A recent popular expositor of pragmatism (Menand, 2001: 351) asks, 'What makes us decide to do one thing when we might do another thing instead?' The issue is one of judgment, he continues,

'Do the right thing' and 'Tell the truth' are only suggestions about criteria, not answers to actual dilemmas. The actual dilemma is what, in the particular case staring you in the face, the right thing to do or the honest thing to say really is. And making those kinds of decisions – about what is right or what is truthful – is like deciding what to order in a restaurant, in the sense that getting the handle on tastiness is no harder or easier (even though it is generally less important) than getting a handle on justice or truth. (Menand, 2001: 351)<sup>6</sup>

Menand continues,

When we are happy with a decision, it doesn't feel arbitrary; it feels like the decision we *had* to reach. And this is because its inevitability is a function of its 'fit' with the whole inchoate set of assumptions of our self-understanding and of the social world we inhabit, the assumptions that give the moral weight – much greater moral weight than logic or taste could ever give – to every judgment we make. This is why, so often, we know we're right before we know *why* we're right. (Menand, 2001: 353)

I am suggesting that any adherence to or advocating of an absolute value like truth or justice must be qualified in and through lived practice and this will entail the

acknowledgment of additional values among which a balance appropriate to any given situation is sought. Ethical practice thereby inevitably begins to relativize ostensibly absolute values. Conversely, however, the highly relative and contingent values of the market often seem to call up in reaction the need for absolute value – whether to legitimate and uphold the system or in direct opposition and resistance to it. Phrased by its proponents as an exclusive and a priori obligation that appears to preclude situational judgment and that often categorically refuses certain consumer choices, this idiom can be called, by those who disagree with it, religious fundamentalism. (I will have something more positive to say about religion later.) Between them, trivial choice and absolute obligation appear to squeeze out any room for practical judgment.

The historical conjunction of highly relative but ultimately trivial values as expressed in consumer choice or ones with uncertain outcomes like investment with ones that claim to be absolute, certain, and obligatory (like the sanctity of marriage, the truth of God's scriptures and so on) may be no accident. It follows that we need to examine the claims made for relative and absolute values and the efforts taken for constructing, maintaining or reducing the distance between them in any given period or argument. Additionally, and irrespective of the specific contents attributed to them, we can inquire about the articulation, dynamics and dialectics of relative and absolute value – the forces that pry them apart, as well as pull them together or transform one into the other, in any given socio-historical context and practical circumstance.

### **COMMENSURABILITY AND INCOMMENSURABILITY**

I began by considering whether relativity is a useful way to distinguish economic from ethical value. I suggested that comparing choice and judgment weakens the distinction between relative and absolute value. However, the same comparison suggests an alternative way to think about the problem, namely by means of commensurability. My argument has two strands. I will suggest that – at least under capitalism – ethical and economic articulations of value are incommensurable to one another. After exploring various dimensions of incommensurability, I will suggest that the primary reason for the incommensurability between ethical and economic value is precisely their distinctive constitutions with respect to commensurability.

As noted earlier, Graeber articulates three ways of thinking about or using the concept of value – the economic, ethical, and semiotic. While Graeber is certainly correct to set his three kinds of value or 'ways of talking about value' at work together, and correct to imply that they interact or overlap differently in specific cultural and historical contexts and conjunctures, we need to attend to whether, where and how economic and ethical value are not actually commensurable, how they do not map directly onto one another, a point suggested implicitly by making the distinction in the first place. We live at a time when economic value is striving mightily to subsume ethical value, but despite the vast waves of corporate corruption or the tides of commoditization that seem to rise ever higher on the shore, like the hurricanes they indirectly produce, such subsumption cannot be completely successful. As Marx indicates, the sacrifice of the ox is simply not commensurable with the value of its flesh.

I am not discerning or proposing a utopian alternative – vegetarian or otherwise – in which everyone puts the welfare of others first. (I leave that to certain late or post-Judaean-Christian philosophers.) Nor am I suggesting that all ethical and economic values

are inherently contradictory or in opposition to one another. The Protestant ethic, as interpreted by Weber, in which, for example, time is money and money is a possible sign of divine election, certainly shows at the least an elective affinity. Nor, am I obviously, taking the utilitarian line that ethical and economic value are commensurable, that, as Bentham postulates, '1st. *Each portion of wealth has a corresponding portion of happiness.* 2nd. *Of each two individuals with unequal fortunes, he who has the most wealth has the most happiness*' (Bentham, 1931: 120 as cited by Macpherson, 1973: 27. Italics in the original). I am arguing that perspectives based on ethical and on economic concepts and principles, on judgment and choice, respectively, are incommensurable; that is to say, following Kuhn, they 'must fail to make complete contact with each other's viewpoints' (Kuhn, 1970: 148, cf. Bernstein, 1983: 83ff.). Each provides us with a transection of social life, but they are not isomorphous and each leaves a remainder.

Individual regimes or structures of value imply commensurability among their components (at least within a given 'rank' or 'sphere' of exchange). I think, however, that incommensurability is as fundamental to culture, society and human experience as commensurable value is to the functioning of the market. Like the Lévi-Straussian 'itch' produced by the grain of sand in the oyster around which the pearl of myth forms (a metaphor I first heard from Sherry Ortner), the incommensurability of meanings and values provides a significant basis for imaginative creation, speculative thought, and innovative practice, as well as simply of ambiguity and undecidability (Lambek, 1993: 400ff). Incommensurability is the basis of much conversation and is central both to understanding the world and to misunderstanding other people, in short, a basis for cultural thickness and richness. (It is certainly an implicit source of much debate – both productive and unproductive – within anthropology itself.) A theory of value must show the limits and limitations of any internally unified regime or structure with respect to commensurability, both in theory and in practice.

This discussion has led us to the third of Graeber's kinds of value, namely semiotic value. As I use the term, 'incommensurability' does not imply a complete absence or blockage of communication or translation but rather a partial barrier, a lack of clear or complete equivalence that must lead to distortion, juggling, compromise, or working misunderstanding. In the best case scenario it leads to productive dialogue and a breakthrough to commensurability at a new level of abstraction or to poetry, and perhaps the former is where the anthropological discussion of value is heading. However, my assumption is that between words and objects, language and the material world, there is some incommensurability and that hence, to the degree that this is so in any given domain, any two languages or language games are likely to be incommensurable to one another with respect to those objects (Lambek, 1993). Obvious examples would be color or kin terminologies, or, following Needham and Schneider, the very nature of 'kinship' itself; religious cosmology provides an even more complex field.<sup>7</sup>

Translation is never perfect but it is always interesting. I cannot take concepts that I weakly translate from Malagasy as 'spirits' and fully match them up with whatever that word means or has meant in English. French anthropologists have translated these same spirits as '*diables*', which is hardly the same. Malagasy speakers on Mayotte themselves juggle the original Malagasy terms with the Bantu '*patros*' and the Muslim '*djin*' and '*shetwan*' and now with the French and English glosses. The issue becomes even more complicated when a noun like 'God' is used to translate religious concepts like '*Kwoth*',

whose designators may well be shifters (deictic) in their original languages (Lambek, 2008). It is difficult for the semantic value of words or the paradigm sets to which they may once have belonged and from which they drew semantic value to remain stable under the circumstances.

The problem is not simply one of comparing synchronic structures or integrating words derived from one discrete structure into that of another structure or language but the fact that words and structures themselves are in motion. As Adam Ashforth reflects as he struggles with representing the discrepancies between what he and his South African subject, Madumo understand by 'witchcraft', the problem is also increasingly that

the terms we use are already translated from one language and culture to another and back again, over and over through generations. There is no pristine vocabulary of difference available to Madumo to describe his experiences with witchcraft that I could translate and then present to the world in terms familiar to the West; no language to make the words seem unique, or the effort of translation worthwhile. The words, like the worlds, are already pre-translated. And yet, there remains something radically and irreducibly different in his experience of these matters from mine. (Ashforth, 2000: 244)

The basic point, as professional translators know, is that there is always a residue. However, as Ashforth's statement implies, commensurability is not only an issue between different languages but also within them. In a sense, this is also Alasdair MacIntyre's complaint in *After Virtue* (1984) about the confused state of ethics in modernity, although MacIntyre may mistake a general feature of the human condition for a historical effect. As John Austin noted,

there is no necessity whatsoever that the various models used in creating our vocabulary, primitive or recent, should all fit together neatly as parts into one single, total model or scheme of, for instance, the doing of actions. It is possible, and indeed highly likely, that our assortment of models will include some, or many that are overlapping, conflicting, or more generally simply *disparate*. (Austin, 1970: 203, his emphasis)<sup>8</sup>

Austin continues in a footnote:

This is by way of a general warning in philosophy. It seems to be too readily assumed that if we can only discover the true meanings of each of a cluster of key terms, usually historic terms, that we use in some particular field (as, for example, 'right', 'good' and the rest in morals), then it must without question transpire that each will fit into place in some single, interlocking, consistent, conceptual scheme. Not only is there no reason to assume this, but all historical probability is against it, especially in the case of a language derived from such various civilizations as ours is. We may cheerfully use, and with weight, terms which are not so much head-on incompatible as simply disparate, which just do not fit in or even on. Just as we cheerfully subscribe to, or have the grace to be torn between, simply disparate ideals – why *must* there be a conceivable amalgam, the Good Life for Man? (Austin, 1970: 203, n. 1)



Phrased another way, it is remarkable that Saussure was correct about the commensurability of the set of phonemes in any given language. Lévi-Strauss and the ethnoscienceists notwithstanding (and leaving aside entirely the arguments from pragmatics), the Saussurean model is of limited value to semantics. It works for small islands of related words or concepts, isolated paradigm sets, but hardly for the vast sea of language. If it did, we wouldn't need philosophy.

Although culture is riven with incommensurables and, indeed, incommensurability is necessary and inevitable, various discursive schemes and systems of practice strive mightily to deny or do away with it, to open spaces of commensurability. Bounded language games and domains of commensurable value are constructed and defended and they are often reasonably, that is, provisionally, successful. This is one way to understand Weber's notion of rationalization or Foucault's of discursive regimes. The capitalist market, disembedded from the social whole (Polanyi, 2001), offers commensurability and transvaluation across a different transection of social life.

## **META-VALUES**

When I was a child we played a board game called *Careers*. As I recall it now, the object of the game was to collect a total of 60 points in three categories, wealth, fame, and happiness; represented, not surprisingly, by dollar signs, stars, and hearts, respectively. At the start of the game players would each record how many points they aimed to accumulate in each category. The first person to acquire 60 points in the proportions he or she had established at the beginning was the winner. Given the way the game was set up, the soundest strategy was to go for 20 points in each category. My mother inevitably placed her entire 60 points in the happiness category. Her reasoning was that happiness is all one needs or wants in life; if one were happy one would, by definition, be satisfied with whatever wealth or fame came one's way. Conversely, wealth or fame without happiness would be worth nothing.<sup>9</sup> She was a very literal-minded person and it was never much fun playing with her.

This vignette illustrates a number of points central to my argument. Let us treat economic, political and ethical value as corresponding to the game's categories of wealth, fame, and happiness respectively. In the game they are commensurable insofar as they are each measured in equivalent points. The points – the frame of the game itself – thus provide a meta-value or absolute standard of value – winning or losing – against which these other values are relative. However, once you had placed your bets you couldn't convert one to the other. Money, as they used to say, cannot buy happiness (though there is by now a superfluity of oxymoronically labeled reality television that run counter to this proverbial piece of wisdom).

Are wealth, fame, and happiness – in real life now – commensurable, as the framework of the game proposes; are they incommensurable, as the game transpires; or are they arranged hierarchically (possibly in a Dumontian sense) such that one is actually not in competition with but encompasses the others (Dumont, 1981)? The answer to this might be historically contingent, as the ethnographic literature, the current state of the world, and the arguments supplied by Mauss, Weber, Simmel, Dumont, and Graeber appear to imply. Or rather, historical contingency might show the range of possibility within certain human constraints.

My mother's argument was essentially that in life happiness has – or ought to have – the function that winning does in the game. It is the aim or end of life, the *telos* that encompasses other values, with respect to which other ends can be evaluated and in whose absence all other ends are actually devoid of value. Within the game, however, happiness was merely equivalent to fame and fortune.

One can debate whether in real life, outside the game, and in this view, outside all games, happiness holds the position of ultimate or meta-value. The most famous argument that it does so is Aristotle's, as presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1976). Aristotle's position has recently been subject to deconstruction by Jonathan Lear (2000) who argues on the basis of psychoanalytic insight against all teleological arguments (including Freud's).<sup>10</sup> Lear suggests it is of the nature of mind always to find another goal outside the prevailing system, to fantasize something beyond current values. Lear writes,

It is constitutive of human life – life influenced by fantasy, life in society, ethical life – that there is an experience that there is something more to life, something left out. There is an inchoate sense that there is a remainder to life, something that is not captured in life as it is so far experienced. Thus there is pressure to construct an image of what lies outside. (Lear, 2000: 163)

In other words, there *is* no 'real' life entirely outside of games; the 'outside' is always and can only be relative to some frame. But equally, life is a lot more complex than the frame of a single game, even a very large and important one like the cultivation of happiness or the pursuit of *kula*, or capital. The frame is never very solid; there is always something visible or imaginable outside it. Even the Azande, who, Evans-Pritchard famously reported, 'reason excellently in the idiom of their beliefs, but . . . cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts' (1937: 338), ought eventually to discover, invent, or imagine alternatives to witchcraft. For Lear, mind is inherently self-disruptive. Whether he is correct that thinking outside the box is the product of either sheer perversity or happenstance, like genetic mutation, or whether we can provide a nobler or more objective source or intention, the general point is well taken and complements my argument that sets of commensurable values always encounter signs, concepts, practices, or values with respect to which they are incommensurable. Lear's point, in sum, is not only that happiness cannot hold the position of ultimate value, but also that nothing can.

However, alongside Lear and the evidence for cultural incommensurability, one could equally argue that it is the nature of society, culture, or mind to posit or require some absolute standard of value or a meta-value that could provide a sound and universal measure of things and for certain strong thinkers to seek one out, truth for Plato, happiness for Aristotle, God for the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, meaning for Weber, justice for political liberals, profit for capitalism, possibly creative labor for Marx. But such aims are never finally successful. There is a dialectic in human history between establishing absolute values against which everything else is relative and to be measured, hence rendered commensurable to one another, and discovering things that render those absolutes relative in turn. (I think we can agree that Hegel was right about dialectics, wrong about totality.) Commoditization is only one, albeit very powerful and

comprehensive, means by which values get relativized. This dialectic operates both at the rhythm of the historical *longue durée* and within the scope of the individual human life. It is, in a sense Weber's problem of meaning. We weave the fabric according to a pattern but inevitably it stretches thin in some places or the style changes.<sup>11</sup> Webs are flimsy, spiders assiduous.

A key point here is that while values are commensurable to each other with respect to a given meta-value, meta-values themselves are incommensurable with one another.<sup>12</sup> Among other things, this complicates the reconstruction of theory, it is thus quite misleading to make a list of truth, happiness, God, and labor as I have just done. Happiness is posited by Aristotle as itself a final value, the end of life; the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God is the arbiter, guarantor, and, in Christianity at least, redeemer of value; in capitalism, money is reckoned ostensibly as a measure and store of value rather than its substance; for Marx, creative labor is the source of value; and so on. Truth, justice, happiness, faith, labor and wealth simply do not map perfectly onto one another, not even in the abstract.

### EXCEPTIONS TO AND EXPANSIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF META-VALUE

Incommensurability evokes the anthropological problems of translation and comparison in a nutshell, but it does not render them impossible (Lambek, 1991) nor vitiate theorizing. As noted, many theories would argue or assume that relative value be defined with respect to some kind of logically higher standard or meta-value which is itself, in this context, claimed not to be relative. Such claims may be logically necessary, but no individual claim of this order is sustainable in the long run. Absolutes are impossible, either because of the nature of the world or because, as Lear would have it, the nature of our minds, or doubtless, both. More immediately, in no two societies, interest groups, or social positions will people continue to agree on the relevant meta-value or on how to apply it. Thus the absolute or meta-value is at risk of becoming relativized or of having its relativity revealed and hence of being displaced, after some confusion, by another standard.

An interesting exception to arguments that values are set respective to meta-values lies with structuralism (and perhaps its various posts-). At least, this is one of structuralism's most interesting claims. Saussurean value is always and only relative, in the sense of being the product of relations to other terms. The explicit meta-value is replaced or its function taken by the structure understood as a whole.<sup>13</sup> In the *Mythologiques* (1970–81) Lévi-Strauss explodes the notion of the whole, following instead chains, loops, and spirals of signifying relations. But because of the absence of a hierarchy of value, the more he does so, the more arbitrary and pointless signification appears to become, until the value of 'meaningful difference' itself approaches nil, that is to say, until semiotic value itself appears to have no value.

In sharp contrast to structuralism, Rappaport (1999) is concerned precisely with hierarchies of meaning or value and meta-value, phrased in his language as sacred postulates. It is part of the genius of his work on ritual and sanctity to show how what I have described as the dialectic of constructing and destroying standards of value gets slowed down or, rather, moves at different rates at different levels of the hierarchy, so that stability, trust and meaning are possible. (He also shows how this process has been

damaged under capitalism.) Rappaport thus provides a framework for understanding the articulation of relative and absolute values within any specific social system and religious tradition.

In one respect Rappaport's argument approaches that of Lévi-Strauss; Rappaport argues that meta-values do their work best when they are stripped of informational content and specificity. Ultimate sacred postulates like 'God is one' may be deeply meaningful to their adherents but they are effective and enduring because they are referentially empty and unfalsifiable. This, in turn, affords an interesting comparison with Lear. Lear speaks of the human predilection to be seduced by enigmatic signifiers,

oracular utterances . . . which we can recognize as having a meaning – indeed as having a special meaning *for us* – but whose content we do not understand [he is thinking not of mysticism but of 'happiness' in Aristotle and 'death' in Freud]. But the latent content of seduction is the idea that there is an explanatory end-of-the-line, an Archimedean point of explanation. (Lear, 2000: 21)

For Rappaport, the lack of content of what he calls ultimate sacred postulates is significant not for its seductive, oracular quality but for the way it serves to bind and insulate sets of values from untoward forces – including the very activity of the mind in producing seductive fantasies – and especially from corruption by values of greater specificity that operate in favor of narrower and more immediate interests. Ultimate sacred postulates are not Archimedean points of explanation; rather, as final sources of authority at arm's length from particular political or social arrangements, they exercise a critical social, regulative or, as Rappaport might have it, ecological function. When socially specific values move up the regulative hierarchy, a phenomenon Rappaport refers to as idolatry, the result is socially and ethically chaotic and harmful. As philosopher and psychoanalyst, Lear's analysis and critique concerns abstract or personal systems of thought whereas, as anthropologist, Rappaport's concerns functioning social systems and human ways of life.

Finally, I note that Kantians may have a very different view of meta-value. Thomas Hill writes of what he calls 'deep deliberation' that entails rational review of one's ends and commitments as well as one's means with the aim to justify one's choices not just to others but to oneself.

The 'preferences' or 'ends' that I have attributed to deep deliberations are not highly variable first order values like a love of chocolate or philosophy; nor are they the substantive controversial values that philosophers have debated since ancient times, like fame, power, wealth, pleasure, and peace of mind. The alleged 'end' or 'value' I presume deep deliberators to have, as implicit in the questions they raise, is just the procedural, second-order concern that one's choices, whatever their content, be capable of surviving a kind of deeply reflective scrutiny of and by oneself. (Hill, 1991: 177–8)

The non-substantive, meta-value here is that one's choices survive self-scrutiny and 'the commitment to make my choices justifiable to myself later' (1991: 186).

## **CHOICE: JUDGMENT:: COMMENSURABILITY: INCOMMENSURABILITY**

I argued earlier that it is important to distinguish choice and judgment. Admittedly, it is also difficult to say precisely how they differ from one another. I suggested that this is because they are incommensurable, but that doesn't help a lot. At this point I should acknowledge that I have not read the philosophical literature that is presumably addressed to the issue. I want to suggest, however, that choice is the operative term among a set of items commensurable among themselves, or with respect to a given meta-value. In these contexts relative values are readily distinguished according to the axis of comparison – price or utility in the case of commodities – that makes them commensurable with one another. Choice in this sense is relatively easy; the alternatives are discrete and measurable and sometimes not a lot is at stake. Advertising to the contrary, most brands of laundry detergent or antacids – and possibly even injury claims lawyers – are equally effective.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, calculations of profit can become quite complex. Equally, in the absence of a clear axis of difference, choice can be difficult and merges into judgment.<sup>15</sup> Choosing between the purchase of apples and oranges is straightforward when price is the only consideration; deciding what to order from a menu when price is not a consideration, as we have seen, is another matter altogether.<sup>16</sup> This raises the complex matter of aesthetic judgment or taste that I will briefly address below.

In contrast to choice, judgment applies to incommensurables, that is, in contexts where there is no standard of measurement or the alternatives cannot be clearly compared along a single axis. Here, judgment has at least the following overlapping dimensions or qualities. Following Aristotle, it entails first establishing a balance between extremes, finding the golden mean between, for example, selfishness and self-sacrifice, where the mean is the virtue situated between two opposing vices. Second, it entails the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis* or practical judgment, that is, fitting one's conduct to meet the particular context and circumstances and also discerning between alternative interpretations of the context. Third, judgment entails balancing among alternate human goals or virtues that are incommensurable to one another (for example, justice and compassion).<sup>17</sup> Fourth, here implicitly following Rappaport, judgment entails discernment with respect to a hierarchy of value and meta-value running from the more relative and situational to the more absolute and encompassing with respect to which there can be less compromise or alternative. One must know when to invoke the higher order values, which thereby risk compromise by the contingent circumstances, and when to leave them behind the scenes.

In sum, *ethical and market value are incommensurable to one another precisely because economics chooses between commensurable values operative under a single meta-value while ethics judges among incommensurable values or meta-values.*

Choice and judgment in my usage are of course ideal types and the distinction may be inappropriate or impossible to sustain in all cultural contexts or domains of human activity. After all, we speak about choosing from a menu rather than exercising judgment about what to eat. In fact, I don't know how to express the distinction between choice and judgment with respect to aesthetics.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps coming to grips with that very discernment is one of the prime objectives of aesthetic theory. Here too the crux may concern whether and how meta-values are brought into play and whether comparison is understood as taking place between commensurable or incommensurable criteria. One

might say that choice becomes judgment when the ethical dimensions of practice are realized and the incommensurability of ostensible alternatives is recognized; judgment is reduced to choice when they are elided.

### THE UBIQUITY OF COMPETITION?

It is obvious that the pursuit of value is not always undertaken virtuously and that even virtuous acts do not always rule out competition. It is not only that virtue ethics includes attention to vice and hence, to assess the ethical value of particular acts is not necessarily to judge them positively. Certain games or practices require that value be exhibited in material tokens that more ascetic regimes like some forms of Protestant and Kantian ethics would decry. This produces the ubiquitous phenomenon of 'tournaments of value' (Appadurai, 1986; Meneley, 1996) – e.g. which suburban house has the neatest lawn – and the tension between display and the potency of concealment (Graeber, 2001). Such tournaments embrace conspicuous consumption, exhibitions of taste, competitive hospitality or generosity, but also the striving for excellence (and the risk of failing) in a variety of domains and arenas from 'lifestyle' to sport to academic papers, even to competitive modesty. Such endeavors are by no means specific to capitalist societies. They can be analyzed along lines of 'economic' value and sheer competition when they entail a clear axis of measurement or discrimination.

Taste is obviously no more a matter of unique and autonomous sensibility than choice is ever 'free'. Bourdieu has shown the degree to which it is constrained or cultivated by such forces as class and hence can be viewed as objectified rather than subjective (1984). Yet objectification does not rule out incommensurability and the appellation of tournaments of value can be too simple and overlook what I would consider the ethical rather than the purely 'economic' dimensions of value. Here I mention a few cautions that serve to illustrate that competition need hardly be the only or central thing at issue.

First, the lens of competition is inappropriate when means and ends are not fully distinguished, as for example, in sportsmanship or in the pleasure of listening to or making music, or indeed in the enjoyment of giving and receiving gifts and hospitality. These are values that MacIntyre (1984) refers to as 'internal' to a given practice and might include particular kinds of skill, grace, or beauty. Tournaments transform the values internal to a practice into a commensurable medium that extends 'externally' between practices, as for example, when amateur players turn professional. When the competition remains internal to the practice it is incommensurable with things outside of it.<sup>19</sup>

Values internal to a practice may also be said to be operative more with respect to expanding what Macpherson (1973) terms the human capacities, whereas the external relations are more readily described as ones of utility. It is only with the shift from capacity to utility that the question of scarcity becomes relevant and hence that we can speak of competition.

Second, there is often no single axis of measurement for virtuosity in a given 'tournament'; incommensurables are at issue and judgment is critical. This is not to say that there are no axes of discrimination. Scoring by judges of Olympic gymnasts or ranking students for fellowships are possible yet also uncomfortable insofar as one realizes that judgment spills over choice or measurement.

Third, Friedman rightly critiques Bourdieu's account of taste insofar as it is based entirely on establishing class or other specific status distinctions.<sup>20</sup> Consumption in

modernity, he argues, is not merely a definition of one's social position but 'a material realization, or attempted realization, of the image of the good life' (1990: 105). In the case of the *sapeurs* – the competitive dressers of Brazzaville – appearances are deceiving. Elegance is a moral practice and not to be reduced to a mere quest for distinction. Rather, the relative value of the clothes and their labels subsists in a wider context of value that is not that of the market but of Congolese understandings about catching and maintaining power. Friedman argues that the clothes come to be constitutive of who their wearers are; in this respect the *sapeur* is quite distinct from the European 'dandy' (at least as Friedman understands the latter). Congolese ideas of power constitute a higher value – absolute with respect to the game of dressing well – and one that changes much more slowly.

A similar lesson can be drawn from Meneley's elegant discussion of Yemeni hospitality (1996) and other interpretive accounts of what might sometimes better be called spectacles of value. The more general point is that insofar as values are relative, they enable and may even entail competition or a sense of mutual evaluation among people who embrace them. But insofar as they are subsumed under a meta-value that is not itself understood as commensurable or scarce, the relevance of competition as the axis of interpretation has its limits. This point is recognized in the frequently observed paradox in many ethical systems that drawing attention to one's virtuous acts (overt display, or possibly even any self-consciousness) undermines the value of what is being indicated. Here the virtue of dignity trumps generosity, fame and so on. As the Sakalava say, 'full containers don't rattle'.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the ubiquity of competition gleaned from the ethnographic literature may be exaggerated. The virtuous path, to follow Aristotle once again, is a path of moderation. Acts of moderation tend to get overlooked in accounts and reanalyzes of societies such as the Trobriands, Kwakiutl, and Maori – or, for that matter, of capitalism. This may be because it is the selfish, aggressive pursuit of value by some that sets the conditions of life for others. It may also be because description of extreme acts and obsessive practices makes for more interesting reception or serves a more potent ideological function (witness Donald Trump on the reality TV show, *The Apprentice*) than judicious ones that of their very nature do not call attention to themselves. It may be a product of the ethnographic practice of abstracting particular local practices from the matrix of alternate and incommensurable ones. A Trobriand player of *kula* is also a husband, a brother and brother-in-law, a maternal uncle, a resident of a locality, a chief or a follower – each of these relationships providing obligations, rewards and arenas for virtuous practice that must in fact impinge on his judgment of how much *kula* to play, how to play it, and so forth. The value of *kula* must ultimately be understood relative to other, possibly incommensurate values as well as to the more encompassing meta-values concerning the kind of person one is or aspires to be and the kind of life one lives or aspires to live. Similarly for a scholar, an athlete, a stockbroker and so forth. Persons and lives are unlikely to be fully understandable in competitive terms. It may be also that the societies selected by Mauss (1990) are precisely those in which, for particular structural or historical reasons, competition was encouraged or required (cf. MacIntyre on the virtues characteristic of 'heroic' societies). If so, and following in the spirit of Mauss himself, we should not see such tournaments of value as ideological mirrors of capitalism.

In sum, the significance of tournaments of value depends in part on whether they are construed as internal or external to specific practices, thus, in part, whether the emphasis is placed on means or ends – and on how these are linked up to, or embedded within, other practices and values.

Any healthy society enables the ‘exercise of the capacities’. This is something quite distinct from the logic of capitalist accumulation (Macpherson, 1973) and it will necessarily involve practices that seek to discern, produce, or enhance value through the overcoming of some kind of obstacle. However such ‘labor’ is not to be understood as external to its ends.

## **RELIGION**

I began the article with the concerns that in capitalism virtue appears to be converted into value. There is a domain, however, in which the reverse may be observed – namely religion. To begin with, it is evident that certain kinds of rituals transform value into virtue. They do this by means of the money and labor that goes into their performance and that is displayed and consumed during that performance. Rappaport’s discussion of rituals of display such as the potlatch makes more or less this point (1999). Here we could acknowledge that what has appeared to outsiders as tournaments of value can have profound moral significance for participants. The accumulated wealth or gathered followers may be counted and marked, but ultimately what they display is force or mana, or some equivalent concept. More generally, Burridge (1969) writes of religions as forms of redemption and notes the frequent concern over money in millenarian movements. Even in a middle-class church service when the collection plate is passed or when congregants donate to charity this kind of transformation takes place. It is as though one of the functions of religion were ‘money-laundering’, turning ‘ill-gotten’ gains, or at least the profits and earnings of the everyday world, into such virtues as largesse, generosity, charity, or honor. The transformation of wealth into sanctity is central to Bloch’s analysis of ritual in highland Madagascar (1989) and it forms a highly salient part of the annual ritual at the Sakalava shrine on the west coast (Lambek, 2002). One of the means by which ritual achieves this feat is through the use of a digital code that, as Rappaport explains, permits what communications engineers call the transduction of information between incommensurable systems. This is achieved by reducing complex information down to a binary signal (Rappaport, 1999: 97ff.). This function of religion may provide one kind of explanation for its popularity, expanding alongside the penetration and expansion of the capitalist economy. Indeed, it may provide the only way not just to siphon off capital, but to transcend capitalist regimes of value.

## **THE OX AND THE BEEF (*LE BOEUF ET DU BOEUF*)**

I close with some remarks on my epigraph that, I fear, I have abused, using it to illustrate points that were not those of its author. Marx draws upon the image of the passive ox in order to criticize Adam Smith for supposing that the value in labor is constituted in simple sacrifice, understood as the forsaking of rest (Marx, 1971: 126). For Marx, the source of value cannot lie in pure negation, in the ox’s passive sacrifice. Labor is to be understood as a positive, creative engagement with and upon the world. Among other things, labor is not to be measured quantitatively, as pure time spent, but discerned in the quality of the act, hence, in my terms, with respect to ethical rather than simply



economic value. Thus the foundation of value is not passive sacrifice of time but active productive labor. Famously, of course, Marx also argued that in capitalism the connection between this ultimate source of value and the currency of circulating values is occluded and mystified. The heart of the problem lies in the transvaluation of acts into objects, epitomized in the commodification of labor (and often referred to as alienation), on the one side, and the re-transvaluation epitomized in the fetishism of commodities (objects into agents), on the other.

Marx's theory of the production of value is of course highly relevant to the present discussion and forms a whole field of scholarship in itself (see Eiss and Pedersen, 2002). One of the distinctive strengths of Marx's analysis is that it transcends the rather static quality of value portrayed in formal models. In Marx, value is active and always in systemic and historical motion. Value is continuously being produced, congealed, circulated, expropriated, hidden, displayed, contested, fetishized – subject to transformation as it moves from one sphere to another. It is like a current of electricity but with its source always in human activity.<sup>22</sup> It is the understanding of value as a quality or product in the first instance of intentional acts rather than arbitrary objects (like sapphires) that informs the best anthropological work on value.

Here I wish to speak not of the beef but of the ox. I think there is more to the ox than Marx allows. It is striking how many societies posit blood sacrifice at the root or grounds of value.<sup>23</sup> Sacrifice lies at the heart of many foundational myths and it may serve as an act of ultimate or meta-value against which other acts come to have value with respect to one another. It is as if the fluctuating economic value of beef *is* somehow established or contextualized with respect to the constant and absolute value of the life of the ox. This is true of sacrifice in the Abrahamic (Judaic-Christian-Islamic) tradition but also in many others. We might think not only of Homeric Greek myth but also of the death of Socrates at the origin of western philosophy. My own insights derive from the place of sacrifice in the Sakalava polity of northwest Madagascar.

In each of these cases, this base is at once temporal – posited as a historical precedent – and structural. For Freud, sacrifice – aggressive and then renunciative – is the source of kinship, the family, religion and psychological maturity. For Durkheim, more abstractly, it is the means of social self-transcendence, and for Lévi-Strauss, the basis of the gift and hence of society. Recounted and enacted in a cycle of love and violence that rivals in saliency the myths of Abraham and Oedipus, Sakalava sacrifice is the source of political legitimacy, determined agency, sacred power and truth, and the meaning of history (Lambek, 2001, 2002, 2007a, 2007b, 2008).<sup>24</sup> Sakalava sacrifice is neither as passive as Marx understood it nor as aggressive or forced as Freud saw it, but ideally a virtuous act of will on the part of the victim. A cow or ox that complains is spared; it is evidently not giving itself willingly and signals that neither is its owner offering it willingly.<sup>25</sup>

Marx's proverb is thus extremely apt but his own interpretation of it is wrong. Sacrifice is not a passive act<sup>26</sup> and it is hardly without consequence for the production of value. Sacrifice, especially self-sacrifice, is a virtuous act, an exemplary instance of judgment rather than choice. If anything, it situates economic value narrowly conceived (market value) with respect to political, religious and ethical value; the value of objects with respect to the value of acts. Sacrifice is a site for the production of meta-value, for

the transformation of value into meta-value, and of relative value into absolute value. Indeed, sacrifice may come to index and iconically represent transvaluation itself.

Marx is correct insofar as his conception fits the passivity of the bourgeoisie, understood not as the sacrificed ox but as the complacent consumers of beef. Beef is simply on sale at the butcher's, or better, the restaurant; the slaughter of the ox is invisible (except in ethnographic film, where animal sacrifice is ubiquitous) and the labor of raising it is not the consumer's. Under capitalism perhaps we have lost the connection between positive acts of sacrifice and the secular values by which we run our lives or choose what to consume. In the post-Puritan world it is assumed that value is something to be gained at no cost to the self – as interest, dividends, or other forms of exchange value. Perhaps that is also part of the explanation for why we are never really satisfied.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, there remains in the West, as elsewhere, also the conception that blood sacrifice – the active, even positive, renunciation (or threat of renunciation) of life, whether that of Abraham or Jesus, Socrates or Wilhelm Tell, or even the valiant unknown soldier or humble cancer victim – lies at the heart (the bloody, beating heart) of human value.<sup>28</sup> This need have nothing to do with asceticism as we commonly understand it. At least, the systems of value it has shored up include those exemplifying dubious forms of display, power, hierarchy, military aggression and exploitation.

Sacrifice is frequently analyzed with respect to exchange rather than production, yet exchange is but one sort of value transaction, one kind of act that needs to be grounded in meta-value. Taking a cue again from Sakalava, blood sacrifice itself need not be primarily a matter of exchange. Sacrifice, as a *productive* act, often initiates a state of affairs (Lambek, 2007a), opening moral vectors, introducing specific commitments, establishing the seriousness of the ensuing values and acts – the ends and means – that are at stake. These are among the performative effects of ritual in Rappaport's analysis, in which commitment to the liturgical order is intrinsic to its enactment. Blood sacrifice is not part of his analysis, but it seems to provide a vivid iconic as well as indexical instantiation of what is at issue. It is certainly something that, once conducted, is not retractable. Hence it epitomizes absolute rather than negotiable value, an incommensurable act or Kantian dignity rather than a commensurable object or Kantian price.

Sacrifice also exemplifies the power of transvaluation, in which the act of destroying something of one kind of value is actually productive of some other kind of value.<sup>29</sup> When it is marked, it emphasizes not the transformation of ethical into material value, of life into meat, but rather the reverse, frequently it is a transvaluation of the material to the ideal, of 'bare' life to ethical, human life, of commensurable value (one ox or another) to indexically established incommensurable meta-value (*this* ox, *my* act).

One might speculate that if, after Aristotle, the virtuous path is one of moderation, meta-value is created by acts of immoderation, acts of meta-virtue. I take the prime instance of such acts of meta-virtue to be what we conventionally call sacrifice, the life of the ox for the ox. The sacrifice of life marks or determines life as valuable. Sacrifice suggests that the ground of human value is *life*, that life itself is the absolute or primary meta-value (cf. Bloch, 1992; Ruel, 1997; Agamben, 1998). In this respect, Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* – happiness, human flourishing – as an ultimate end may not be so far off the mark.

## CONCLUSION: VIRTUE AND VALUE

Alliteration aside, what is virtue doing in this article alongside value? Perhaps we should reserve 'virtue' to the ascription of acts and 'value' to objects. Moreover, virtue could be understood as internal to acts or practices whereas value is generally external to objects (but cf. Weiner, 1992). Value is something we attribute to practice viewed from outside, as though the practice were an object (as in the commoditization of labor); virtue expresses the qualities needed to excel in the practice viewed from the inside. Yet value has also been used to acknowledge both the productive qualities and the intentional orientations of acts and many of the most interesting discussions in the field have transcended easy distinctions between acts and objects. Virtue also marks a shift in anthropological discussions of ethics away from the dominant Durkheimian view of rule and obligation towards practice and character.

I offer two alternative conclusions. Take your pick. Or use your judgment.

*Conclusion One.* By using the word 'virtue' I have been drawing attention to a universal ethical dimension of human practice. I have also been expressing a judgment concerning which ethical theory among utilitarianism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics I find most valuable. Even if MacIntyre is right to suggest that virtue theory cannot be applied coherently or consistently today, it remains the case that it corresponds better than the other two theories to what is empirically the case, not only in a vast range of pre- or extra-modern societies, but among ourselves. We do strive much of the time to do what is right and with respect to standards of excellence. Such endeavor, understood as situated judgment with respect to articulating a variety of incommensurable practices, may be understood as itself a kind of practice of practice, or meta-practice. To bring this close to home, we strive to write the best papers we can while balancing our work on them with our other commitments. We do this because we have learned to care about both the practice and the outcome, not in rational calculation of the greatest good – a theory which, in effect, would have us reduce judgment to choice; not because we feel rationally bound, against our inner desires, to follow the rules; and not exclusively in a tournament of value, in a game of Careers or in a career understood as a game, in the aspiration of greater prestige, power, or income. We do it because (on whatever neurotic basis) that is who we are or who we have come to be. *Who we are* is something larger than can be described or circumscribed by any single hierarchy of value or set of commensurable values.

*Conclusion Two.* In a holistic universe, maybe there was no clear separation between quality and quantity, nor between acts and objects, means and ends, perspectives located inside and outside practice. Following Mauss, maybe there was no clear distinction between public and private; person and individual; society, religion and economy; gift and commodity; virtue and value.

I only partly believe in the historical existence of this holistic universe although I do value it as an ideal type (in both senses of 'ideal'). We should not be limited by our immediate experience from imagining qualitatively distinct alternatives to capitalism. But I am afraid that pictures of the holistic universe are sometimes driven a bit too strongly by what we would like to see. In addition, insofar as these alternate social worlds are pictured simply as mirror images to capitalist modernity, binary distinctions of quality versus quantity and so forth, they become measurable against the present, commensurable along an axis of comparison. Everything I have said here leads me to

think, to the contrary, that the alternatives – why limit them to just one? – are incommensurable rather than commensurable with capitalist modernity. Hence – and this may sound paradoxical – that these alternate social worlds are in some ways more different but less easily distinguishable from our own than we imagine.

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### Notes

- 1 This is the approach of David Graeber (2001), taking his cue from Nancy Munn (1986).
- 2 Interestingly, monetarization may spread with the rise of gambling (Geertz, 1973: 432, n.18). Whether gambling is viewed as immoral or, as Geertz suggests of Balinese cock-fighting, of moral import, is also of considerable interest.
- 3 The same could be said of Weber's discussion of the Protestant ethic (1958).
- 4 What I call judgment is often referred to as practical reasoning; I avoid that term here as its use by Marshall Sahlins (1976) is almost exactly the inverse of what I mean by it. He uses it to refer to the utilitarian position. My meaning derives from Aristotle's *phronesis*.
- 5 For further discussion of Macpherson, see Lambek (2007c). Sahlins also draws heavily on Macpherson.
- 6 Menand adds: 'In the end you will do what you believe is "right", but "rightness" will be, in effect, the compliment you give to the outcome of your deliberations. Though it is always in view while you are thinking, "what is right" is something that appears in its complete form at the end, not the beginning, of your deliberation' (Menand, 2001: 352). Whether this is self-serving, it doesn't appear this way.
- 7 I am side-stepping both social constructionism and Whorfian linguistic relativism here although obviously the various arguments have relevance for one another.
- 8 Compare also Raymond Williams', *Keywords* (1976) and various recent genealogical accounts.
- 9 It is tempting to give happiness a specific content but that is not my intention. Roger Crisp suggests that, 'Happiness is not sex, wealth and power, but partly at least, justice itself' (1996: 9). May and Abraham Edel remark that there may be alternative conceptions or kinds of happiness and it may not be always consciously sought. The American conception of happiness is:

an extremely local view which heavily weights physical comforts, individual achievement, successful mastery of obstacles; which gives a central place to an

ideal of forward movement or progress; and which tends to thrust aside such other candidates as 'contentment', contemplation, and any suggestion of spiritual insight through suffering. (Edel and Edel, 2000: 234)

This is certainly not what my mother meant.

- 10 An additional Freudian criticism of Aristotle is that Aristotle underestimates the sources of human unhappiness, in particular those of contradiction, ambivalence and guilt.
- 11 Allusion here is not only to Weber, which as a German common noun means weaver, but, as students of Sahlins will know, to Benedict on patterns and Lowie on shreds and patches of culture, no less than to Kroeber on cycles of dress style.
- 12 Along with MacIntyre and others, I reject the utilitarian idea that human goals can be measured against each other like commodities against a standard of money.
- 13 Or perhaps one could say that the ground of value for one level of a hierarchy is established by another; thus the value of phonemics would be set by morphology. Dumont's hierarchies of encompassment may be something of this order.
- 14 However, the very act of seeking to make a choice (a purchase, for instance) may entail judgment. This is the sort of issue addressed in Miller's work on consumption (1998). Moreover some financial choices may be very consequential.
- 15 This is captured in the old joke about the Jewish mother who buys her son two neckties. He puts one on and she says, 'So what's the matter, you don't like the other one?'
- 16 Recall the menus without prices that were once handed to women in the company of men in expensive restaurants.
- 17 However, some virtue theorists argue that the virtues are harmonious and complementary rather than competing
- 18 Certainly, many writers would not wish to equate judgment with taste.
- 19 The question of how broad the scope of any given practice is remains open, for example, the practice of the spirit medium in a specific performance as a spirit, the practice of mediumship as a career, or the practice of a unified life of which mediumship is a part (Lambek, 1988). This is a large issue that I cannot address here.
- 20 My thanks to Jackie Solway for directing me to this essay.
- 21 See Lambek (2002) and compare Graeber (2001) on display more generally.
- 22 On transvaluation see the beautiful discussion by Eiss of the transformation of value among meat, money, and grace in Mexico (2002). On the containment and fetishization of value by Sakalava see Lambek (2001). On the opacity and currents of value associated with sapphires see Walsh (2004); conversely, on the impact of circulating ideas of virtue on the value of diamonds see Solway (2007). On questions of the semiotics of materiality more generally, see Graeber (2001) and Keane (2007).
- 23 Or, as in the case of the Jains, the explicit rejection of blood sacrifice (Babb, 2003).
- 24 Research among Sakalava of Mahajanga throughout the 1990s and subsequently has been supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 25 I disregard here additional cultural specificity, notably, the fact that among Sakalava the prototypical hero/victim is a woman rather than a man (Lambek, 2007b).

- 26 See also Asad (2003) on the agency that adheres in suffering.
- 27 I owe the idea of no-cost value to a lecture long ago by Aram Yengoyan. As both Macpherson (1973) and Sahlins (1996) demonstrate, there is a long tradition of neediness in which western philosophy can be seen almost as a complaint discourse in search of a fix.
- 28 The wars that lie at the heart of so many national mythologies, the tombs of unknown soldiers, statues of leaders who died under fire, and the like, are all evocations of sacrifice (cf. Verdery, 1999).
- 29 This may be explicit in some systems of thought, for example, Kwakiutl (Goldman, 1975).

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