

FROM VALUES TO THE CHALLENGE OF A GOOD FUTURE

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1. Values and life expectations

Europe is living in the middle of a deep value crisis, or at least it would seem so if one follows the current media discussion. On one hand, some people complain of the disappearance of values. On the other hand, it is said that there may be too many values to choose from and we are lost in a forest of 'isms' unable to decide what values to choose to guide our lives. It is thought that old values are disintegrating as new ones are constantly being created to replace them. Some people long to return to an age when life was simpler and clearer, your neighbour resembled yourself and everybody shared the same, easily determined values. All in all, it can be assumed that something is amiss with the European value system. It suggests that we have lost something relevant, something that was common to all- -that characterised us, and that made us what we are, but now we are bereft and have nothing worth mentioning to replace our loss.

1.1 The spectrum of possibilities

To give an answer to that dilemma, we have to look at society and its present situation from a different angle. It seems that we are heading towards a new stable phase in social and economic development at a high speed, but this process is making our reality more and more confusing. We have passed through an era of stable development, which lasted for decades, and at the moment, we are going through a period of rapid, and still accelerating, change. The changes we are experiencing in the present phase of transition are turbulent and partly chaotic, and augur for profound alterations in our social infrastructures, cultures, economic practices, politics and policy making (e.g. *Giddens* 1991, 32-34, 53; see also *Castells* 1996, 1997, 1998). Simultaneously affected are the rational and the values underlying those activities.

This – social transition – means that new possibilities and requirements are being offered to actors and decision-makers. A characteristic of transitional periods is that it is filled with myriad possibilities for choice – i.e. many plausible futures. Currently there is more choice than before, but it is also more difficult to perceive the future than it was the case before this period. It is as impossible to achieve reliable information about coming developments by using time series, as it is to by following the past paths of development and predicting what will be based on that information. The complexity of human life grows exponentially as the interaction of events and their consequences shifts trends in unforeseeable directions (*Malaska* 1991). Globalisation, networking, new innovations, the accelerating speed of information flow and its unlimited growth affect the coming development (e.g. *Castells* 1996, 1997, 1998). Thus there is no way we can take such matters into consideration which have not yet taken place or which have not even been invented yet (*Popper* 1995).

This period is different from all previous times in human history: our time-related – temporal – possibilities have taken on nearly incomprehensible dimensions. The time available for each act and task is becoming scarcer and its rarity makes it a more expensive resource. Time has become a product, merchandise, which can be sold and bought. Rapidity – especially the rapidity of choosing, digesting and developing a purpose for use of knowledge – is one of the pillars of a society based on information. Real-time information about what is going on and to whom and wherever reaches us instantly and continuously. We are aware that we are able today to make decisions the consequences of which will only become visible in hundreds of years from now decisions that will be the dilemmas of coming generations. On the other hand, we also know that our decisions might have spatial consequences because the acts we commit here and now might cause problems on the other side of the world. Therefore even though decisions have become much more complex to make, spatial or temporal distances do not remove our responsibility to others in today's decision-making.

We take a position on the future in our decisions, whether we know it or not. Images of the future as well as our fears and hopes direct our present decision-making and choices, both on the individual and on the social level. On the other hand, the quality of the future is dependent on the choices and decisions we make now (*Rubin* 1995, 104-105; 2000). Choices, however, are not carried out by common consent, but are made within a state of different and sometimes conflicting needs, values and aims. Therefore choices, which are based on different reasons, have to compete with each other for the preconditions offered by social transition.

1.2 The definition of values

From an individual's point of view, values can be understood as symbols, which define behaviour, choices and considerations in different situations of decision-making and action. From society's point of view, the aim of a set of values is to keep a community together by striving to eliminate, or control, structural fluctuations.

WHAT ARE VALUES?



- ♠ Symbols, which define our behaviour, choices and considerations in different situations of decision-making and action.
- ♠ Aims, which are placed above conflicts and towards which an individual or society can orientate, but which can never be completely reached.
- ♠ Active, non-objective ethical symbols and quality definitions of a human mind (individual values), and moral codes supported by society (social values). Values often manifest themselves in norms as well as prohibitions, orders, laws and instructions which direct and control action and choices.
- ♠ States of ethical awareness (good/bad, right/wrong, true/false, beautiful/ugly).
- ♠ Attitudes, which together with knowledge and emotion guide human action, choices and deeds on both the conscious and subconscious level.

Values are ultimately based on needs and they motivate action and decisions. It is assumed that people possess an ability to connect such qualities as ethically good/ethically bad, valuable/valueless, morally acceptable/morally unacceptable

to things and acts. Those things and acts which are assigned definitions are called value bearers by *von Wright* (1989). Values therefore are the structural, conceptual attributes of those value bearers.

This ability to value and to give attributes is also something that can be developed, taught, and which can be affected. Knowledge *per se* does not change human values, but with the help of new information, a human being can widen the area he/she feels belonging to his/her field of decision-making. While some decision simply extends our possibilities, some other decision may weaken the possibility for choice in the future, and on the other hand, it can bring about new dimensions for decision-making.

2. Value change

2.1 *The four reasons for value change*

Even though values are changing at a slow rate, regularity can be found in their change, both on the individual and on the social level. Values are not like fashions, in fact several studies prove that value change is a very slow and basic event and that the core values of European people have changed very slowly, if at all. Rather it can be said that the order of importance of values, beliefs, expectation, and the social value climate itself are the aspects which are undergoing change (*Räikkä* 1994, 15-19; *Rubin* 1996, 112-113).

Personal values change throughout the course of life. According to researches, the effect of ageing can be seen as spontaneity in the choice of values becomes less frequent and responsibility grows together with age. On the other hand, some types of social turmoil can change the values of the members of a specific society. For instance in Russia, the strong political and social upheaval and their effect on citizens' values, behaviour, and the grounds for that has caused a complete change in the value structure of the nation (*Räikkä* 1994, 15-19; *Rubin* 1996, 112).

Some deep personal experience can change values and through that, the pattern of an individual's choices and behaviour (*Räikkä* 1994, 15-19). An example of this can be religious or political awakening and the influence that has on the values, world view and life style of the person in question. Also the growth of scientific knowledge changes values, starting from the social level (*Räikkä* 1994, 15-19). When Galileo Galilei proved that the Earth is a sphere revolving around the Sun, and not the contrary, the effect of this information on society was devastating to some, both on the symbolic level and in real life. Gradually it meant the authority of the clergy and the Pope was eroded and the values

dictated and legitimised by religion were questioned. What followed was the era of Enlightenment as the whole system of values was called into question.

2.2 *The changing order of values*

Values may change also so that some value previously held as important becomes less and less used, or on the contrary, some value which has not been in use for a long time, becomes more and more common. For instance, the value people set on thriftiness in society varies according to economic trends and the social situation. Also the order of importance of values changes over time. Today values that discuss a pleasant, clean and healthy environment are much more prevalent than a few decades ago, while such values as obedience or allegiance are less important. Individuality as a value seems to gain more space at the cost of the pursuit of uniformity and perhaps also solidarity (*Helve* 1993, 70; *Inglehart* 1997, 75).

Together with social transition, values also gain new dimensions (*Rubin* 1996, 108). For instance well-being remains a value, but people include new things in it – it is told in new words. Well-being is no more merely composed of the fulfilment of tangible needs, but the meaning of intangible needs, such as interaction, or creativity. Intangible needs are increasing, at the same time, as qualifications attached to nature and the preservation of the environment are more and more understood as belonging to welfare (*Inglehart* 1997). On the other hand, completely new elements can be attached to the concepts of well-being and the welfare society, as we can see when we explore different interpretations of economic or political interests. This leads to a watered-down version of the original concept that is incapable of defining anything specific (*Rubin* 1996, 116).

Furthermore, in different places and between groups of people, the same value may differ very much in its content, or interpretation (*Räikkä* 1994, 15-19). A good example of this is chastity, which most probably is a value everywhere in the world, but its application or content (or when again using *von Wright's*, 1989, terms, the value bearer) differ very much both in behaviour, disguise, and in interaction between the sexes. It is interesting to consider what chastity really means here and now in our society, and what it may mean in the future.

Values that are traditional and belong to some community or social institution can also be extended to new groups or targets. Thus we can take the converting of people to the principles of democracy in the developing countries, or the extending of the principle of equality to sexual minorities, or the budding discussion on what rights new forms of life should have. Do we have to give the

same rights of life to artificial life and creatures born through artificial means that those we give to animals. How do we expect those beings to treat us?

2.3 Changing value structures

Even though values are changing slowly, attitudes and also value structures may change rapidly (e.g. *Räikkä* 1994, 15-19; *Rubin* 1996; *Inglehart* 1997). A value structure means a moral and ethical system which defines right from wrong and which is dependent on the historical and cultural background of a society. In an era of social transition moral and ethical belief systems can crumble, change, and may even fall.

A rapid change in a value structure, however, is often a chaotic incident and a shocking experience to those members of society who have to go through it. It often weakens social integration. However, trust in value structures may perhaps gradually become less and less significant, while the values of individuality have grown in their importance. It can be asked, whether for instance the Finns have any more clear or solid, uniform value structures or have values become clearly subjective and personal matters today.

3. Morals, values and objectives

Moral consideration presupposes that there are values. Some of the values we regard as valuable *per se* and they are sought after and striven for just for themselves. Such values are called intrinsic values, examples being the value of independence, or the value of equality. Instrumental values for their part are values attached to the objects we set as targets for our actions. We use those values as tools, or instruments, in our endeavours to reach something still higher or more valuable with their help. An instrumental value is rest. Rest is not a value in itself, but we give it a value when trying to gain a more important goal, our personal well-being. A delicious meal can be composed of both instrumental value as a promoter of human well-being and health, and intrinsic value, i.e. as an experience which is pleasant and worth pursuing (*von Wright* 1989).

3.1 Practical wisdom and practical sensibility

We are in the middle of a change from society which aims at fulfilling our basic needs and we are heading towards society, where social evaluation and self-realisation become more and more important. It is typical of our times which emphasise accountability, speed and emotional experience that people value more the means through which they can gain random objectives than the analysis and evaluation of those objectives as such. For instance the image of

science, which used to dwell in public knowledge, as the pure search for truth for the sake of truth itself has changed. Reaching for the objective by making good use of research and science (= practical sensibility) has become more important than the process of analysing the targets as such (= practical wisdom) (*von Wright* 1989, see also *Lyotard* 1984). At the same time, nothing is changing as rapidly as common practice – new modes of doing things and new means to do them are being introduced daily. Therefore it can be said that applied science and research have become a central force of production.

The relationship of randomly sought objectives as to what is really important for a human being from the point of view of the continuation of life has become blurred. We are in a situation where “the fulfilment of my desires is allowed to happen at the cost of your needs”, as *von Wright* (1989) so bluntly says.

Yet another viewpoint on the values of the future can be found when we explore normative values, i.e., values which are important in order to ensure the continuation of life through the analysis of the different dimensions of human or social life. If the existence of a human being, or a society, is divided into three levels, intellectual, emotional, and functional, the emotional level has been undervalued in public discussion. The occasional remarks and recent articles on emotional intelligence (see e.g. *Mayer et al.* 1990, *Salovey & Sluyter* 1997) have not managed to lift the general suspicion, or distrust of officially giving emotionality a central part in human decision-making. Even if feelings and emotions do exert a strong influence over our decision making process whether we admit it or not people can appear rational in their actions and decisions, even when the motivation underlying those choices may be non-rational and/or emotional. On the other hand, the visible behaviour may seem non-rational to others who evaluate it from the socially shared point of view, although it is originally based on thought patterns that are rational to the performer (see e.g. *Etzioni* 1988, 125-150; *Carr & Pihlanto* 1998, *Rubin* 2000, 36-38).

Etzioni (1988, 125-150) has shown that human choice relies on the consideration of preferences and emotions that are prevalent in a decision-making situation. In other words, human choice derives from both a knowledge base and from a value base – from instrumental and intrinsic values – as well as from predictions about the future, and from one’s own expected possibilities to function in the chosen future situation (*Kamppinen & Raivola* 1995, 19-20). The knowledge base is formed from information defined as relevant to the issue at hand, plus its reliability, and its links to other relevant information in the decision-making process. Values, on the other hand, come in to play first in the selection of the idealised outcome, and then the selection of the means to achieve that end.

3.2 *The impact of real-time availability in values*

While we disregard, in public discussion, an emphasis on emotionality, the impact of emotional experience is becoming more and more important. The same can be said about speed, both in gaining results and in reaching for individual pleasure. We live in a real-time world where the meaning of time is becoming less and less important and the understanding of time as a dimension with depth is diminishing while the impact of real-time and fulltime availability and transience is growing stronger. Information reaches us increasingly in parallels and spatial, temporal and content-related distances are losing their significance. Fiction and facts are easily mixed in the mind of the receiver so that it is more and more difficult for him/her to know which part of reality, or even, which reality is true (*Rubin 1995, 103-104*).

Together with this development, the differentiation between real and illusory is losing its power in the images of the world and simultaneously the interface between the private and public is dimming. If we exaggerate somewhat, the viewer – and here we especially mean young people – is not necessarily able to give a different emphasis to the suffering of people in Chechnya than the heartaches of Ally McBeal, or to make a difference in the meaning of a Formula 1 driver driving off the track to the swinging of Nokia's stock market value, since all this is being presented with the same weighting and semantic form. The Internet is often mentioned as the tool that enables all to access unlimited information. If this idea were true, would it mean that equality in the world will automatically increase, when we have more than 550 billion¹ web pages of information available for basically anybody to explore? However, we as human beings are very new in this limitless information society (which *Castells* in his trilogy (1996-1998) calls the information age) that we simply have not been able to develop even the most primitive tools yet to organise, select or evaluate all this information. Except for the rules of logical argumentation there are no effective methods or tools on the Internet to differentiate the substance of a piece of information as right or wrong, valuable or worthless, true or false, serious or entertaining. This is not a study subject at schools and universities.

¹ In the newspaper Helsingin Sanomat (28 July, 2000) there was an article which described a study made in the USA on the effectiveness of the search service tools available on the Internet. This study was carried out at the beginning of the year 2000 and it revealed that at that point, there were more than 550 billion pages of information available on the Internet.

4. Value relativity and universality

4.1 *The danger of value relativism*

The danger of value relativity is that it creates a value climate, which emphasises individualisation and the freedom of choice of individuals at the cost of responsibility (Taylor 1991). Late-modernity questions the prevalent idea of everyday life by introducing a plurality of opportunities and ways from which to choose a lifepath, instead of those few cherished by the industrial, modern human being. It keenly accepts and supports differences between people, and instead of putting pressure on homogeneity and similarities, as happened in the modern era, late-modernity emphasises the importance of originality and individual creativity (see e.g. Taylor 1991, Hautamäki 1996, 35-36; Koski 1998). This social interdependency brings a heavy burden of responsibility when it comes to dealing with such duties as choosing a good life, being economically and socially successful and choosing the right kind of values (Rubin 2000, 60).

This may lead to an idea that all that is right in a moral or ethical sense as wrong and right are always dependent on the environment or culture where the person happens to live. This, for its part, brings about a belief that general and uniform guiding principles for defining or comprehending right and wrong do not actually exist. Therefore in principle we simply do not have any right to regard practices, which are not traditionally our own wrong nor judge them. However, if we go far enough along this path of thought, we end up in a *cul-de-sac*. For instance we could not maintain any judicial institutions with which to condemn ritual murders, cannibalism, female circumcision, etc., if those practices can be justified as a part of some cultural or ethnic tradition.

4.2 *Universal values*

Lately the researchers of values and ethics have started to look for those values and convictions (value bearers) which are common in one way or another in all cultures and therefore can be understood as universal². Then the problem is how different cultures interpret those values in their everyday practices i.e. what content do they give their value bearers. It has been said that in our world, there is a clear inclination towards the values becoming more and more uniform. A need for a uniform global moral order or a set of rules has arisen and such concepts as democracy, human rights, equality, fairness, and freedom are understood as global.

² See e.g. The web page of the UN University for the project of Global Ethos, <http://vulab.ias.unu.edu/seminars/lectures/karim/>

When the existence of universal values – generally accepted ethical norms for distinguishing between good and bad, right and wrong – comes into doubt, the responsibility for constructing a valid ethical code is placed on the shoulders of the individual. The result may be a proliferation of ethical codes and a plethora of morals, which are all equally valid and relevant. Universal or nearly universal values can be understood as processes, which belong to the course of development of the human race, slowly maturing and changing all the time. Although values are not understood all over the world in the same way, and have been given a different interpretation in different cultures at different times, the moral and value content created during the course of our own Western culture seems to be gradually spreading to other cultures. At the same time, a new self-respect and self-awareness is growing among different ethnic groups and religions and this is bound to create conflict in the near future.

This is the reason for the growing competition of value systems and moral codes that are different, but understood as equally valuable, plausible and relevant. The news, which bring us real-time information about tragic cultural collisions in New York, Afghanistan, the Middle East and elsewhere provide evidence for this on a daily basis. Finally, such value relativism may end up in loosening social ties and weakening social cohesion (see e.g. *Taylor 1991; Hellsten 1997*).

Values are also dependent on the continuing interaction between a human being and his/her social environment. It is very important to study what common values we may already have and to consider and give grounds to other common values we should and could create. This brings the paper round to the question; what logical reasons and arguments may we find to support the idea that some specific values should be spread as universal for the sake of our common well-being and sustainable development.

5. Values and self-realisation

5.1 Splintering reality

With the information constantly flowing in, the whole picture of reality is becoming more and more fragmented and the problem of young people today is a splintering image of the world (see e.g. *Helve 1993, Rubin 1998, 2000*). Along with this process, public discussion and information gathered from the mass media is more and more weighted towards providing entertainment material, which neutralises confusion. Hence it is especially difficult to perceive from such material what is truly important and what is entertainment. Similarly, on the emotional level we can experience deep unity with the whole world while, mourning the tragic death of a beautiful princess. The more virtual the world

becomes the more reality, virtual reality and the momentary virtuality of real reality is mixed.

This confusing situation may also lead to bewildering problems, when people have to make ethical choices. Instead of considering cause and reason, the present value atmosphere leads to disinclination to consider the impacts of values on our choices and needs, as well as the inability to see the ethical, moral and concrete consequences. Short-sightedness increases in our solutions and short term benefits overshadow the long term consequences, which, when they come to happen, come as surprises and create more confusion and increase the feeling of insecurity. However, several researchers consider this way of thinking shallow and vague, because it emphasises the investigation of effects instead of causes. Moreover, such a tendency in scientific thinking may open the way for using the mass media and public opinion for selfish manipulation.

5.2 The challenge of a good future

The problem of our time is that individualism seems to promise more freedom, more rights and greater personal happiness. However, when these ideals lose their connection to social responsibility, there is a danger that they become detached from the concern for the “common good” and, instead, turn to achieving personal welfare. As *von Wright* (1989) has pointed out, there are features in our current culture, which accentuate the realisation of our wishes and desires and the attainment of occasional goals at the cost of wisdom and values. *Bauman* (1998, 82-85) argues that as people are seduced into trying to achieve happiness through consumption, “the gathering of sensations, life from attraction to attraction and from sensation to sensation” becomes the main goal of life for many members of contemporary society. This consumerism, or, as *Bauman* puts it, the “disguise of a free will”, leads to a short-sighted tendency towards narcissistic fulfilment of one’s immediate desires at the cost of the consideration of one’s needs, life management and planning.

If all those features described above take place simultaneously, we are facing a situation where the winning of social appreciation and self-realisation at any cost easily becomes the basic motive for action and choices on the individual level. It may be that the inclination towards the short-sighted and narcissistic fulfilment of desires will grow at the cost of needs, which are based on consideration, long-term life management, and planning for ones personal life. In order to live in the future, the immediate challenge in front of each person is the ability to control change and the ability to live in a rapidly transforming world. The alienation caused by this change can be diminished by developing the skills for the long-term consideration of what has value and can support a good life. This means having the ability to analyse a situation and outline wholes

and interdependencies in them. This work becomes ever more important as a challenge both for the media and for the decision-makers and educators in society.

Although our everyday actions are based on the assumption that there is always something stable and lasting in the world, the escalating rate of change has affected our ethical sense and base through the “imaginization” of the world generated by the mass media and contemporary sciences (Vattimo 1989, 34-35). Individualisation and the rise of the generalisation of instrumental reason (Taylor 1991, 2-8) add to that. Nevertheless, it is possible and, from an ethical viewpoint, also an obligation, to consider and evaluate potential futures in relation to our own choices. The ethical responsibility inherent in human interaction presupposes that the consequences of our choices made in the present will be considered. Bluntly put, this means that scientists cannot ignore their future responsibility and must consider how it impacts on their research (Niiniluoto 1999, 8.)

Ultimately a good future is a value choice and we cannot escape the fact that as the world becomes globalised, we have to face completely new cultures, images of the world and value structures. Therefore we have to consider how we react to that, how stable and just our own value system is, and consider whether it is strong enough to carry us through these changing times.

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