

## Values – an analysis of the possibilities.

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The philosopher Colin McGinn has presented a set of categories which can be helpful in analysing difficult topics in philosophy. They seem to be particularly helpful in discussing the question of values, and I will present them here, together with what I see to be the consequences.

McGinn's set of categories can be listed under the acronym DIME. They comprise ways in which philosophers and other thinkers deal with thorny issues. The four possibilities under these headings are, in brief summary:

D: Domesticate, deconstruct. That is, convert the problematic concept into something less formidable and more tractable.

I: Irreducibility. Assert that the problematic concept is not reducible to anything else more basic, but exists in its own right and should be accepted as such.

M: Mystical, miraculous. Assign the origin of the problematic concept to something that is beyond human knowledge, possibly divine.

E: Eliminate. Deny that the problematic concept exists or corresponds to anything real at all.

So let's try to see how these categories are likely to work if applied to values.

D: Values under this option are not held to be absolute or implying any high level categories. . They are simply an expression of human preferences and goals, either for individuals or for groups.

I: Values do comprise a distinct category, something we can recognise and apply to our own choices. The assignment of particular values to particular things can be debated, but the value category itself is there, a part of existing things, and simply to be accepted as a reality.

M: The value category is not merely a natural fact of our existence but derives from a deeper source, for example the nature of God

E: There is no such thing as a value. It is all illusory, and there are therefore no such things as moral obligations either. It would be honest not to use value terms, but let's not claim that there is any *value* in honesty! Do whatever you can get away with is the practical advice.

McGinn's own position, perhaps unsurprisingly, is "none of the above". He believes in "transcendental naturalism" (TN) which asserts that the intractability of certain problems comes from our own limitations, and is not intrinsic to the topic as such. We are just not equipped to understand the issues better than we do. Whatever their "real nature" may be we lack the ability to deal with it and that is why we fail. However in his book "Problems in Philosophy" the question of values is not one of those that are discussed. TN would appear in the end to be a sort of "Irreducibility –with-attitude". Position M is avoided – or should we say evaded? – by stating that nature, not the Deity – is "transcendent", but it is transcendent through being in important ways inscrutable to ourselves, that is, to our intellectual facilities. The difficult issues thus appear as irreducible to us, but perhaps they might not be so to other beings.

Now let us try to consider some further implications of all this..

D: On this approach, when I say that something is good, I mean that it is good to me, meaning that I deeply favour it. It is nice if it is also good to you; we then have something in common, rather like supporting the same football team. But there can be no rational *argument* between us if we believe different things are good. You might try to convince me that my set of values is logically inconsistent, but once I have cleared that sort of thing up, my “values” may still end up being considerably different from yours. For example, I might favour individual freedom and diversity; you might favour a well-ordered society in which everyone did the same things. (This particular instance can show up in quite minor ways: should all the house doors in a street be painted the same colour?) If values are not absolute, then there is no basis for different people to argue about “who is right”. In societies, values in this interpretation present themselves often as “codes of conduct”. These may be discussed on pragmatic grounds but then the defining issue is what the majority want, what the most powerful clique want, or what is most convenient. If another society does it differently that is their business, and one has no basis, again, to say that they are “wrong”.

I: Values taken as real facts of existence can be absolute, namely objective facts about the universe. This position can scarcely be held if one is a strict physical materialist, but there exist other philosophical and credal positions which allow absolute values. We can argue rationally about values, therefore. There are clearly points of issue about whether my value-sense is working more correctly than your value-sense, needless to say. It is rather like two astronomers, both using their telescopes to the limits of their resolution, seeing slightly different things. If we can obtain some kind of concordance between all our individual senses of values, however, that could be an indication that these are functioning to some extent correctly. Values existing as Platonic entities could come in this I classification, or perhaps alternatively under M. It may be that Buddhist belief-systems view values in this kind of way, since if we contravene a certain universal set of values then Karma will act, and we will suffer accordingly in some future existence.

M: We start off with a willingness to believe in absolute values, and some notions about what they consist of in many circumstances. We don't rely completely on our own perceptions of values, however. We prefer to attribute true values ultimately to the nature of God, and then to obtain more reliable determinations of them from a trusted authoritative source, which will in practice depend on how we obtain or live out our religious faith. There is thus a distinction between understanding where values come from and knowing what they are. This can give rise to arguments, since while two parties might agree with the proposal that values derive from God, different sources of authority become trusted when they attempt to establish what the actual position of value should be with regard to a particular topic. But actual choices of action can depend on this. In secular life it can be surprisingly similar; thus, different versions of communism have followed different party leaders and enforced different party lines. Stalin or Trotsky? However in Christianity and Judaism it is claimed that human beings are in the image of God, which means that in principle we are able to have the same values as come from God, and in practice our values will at least have some similarity, unless we have become hopelessly corrupt.

E: This is logically a very simple position; however in practice people seem to have difficulties in living with it. Of course, plenty of cynics can be found. They do not waste their time in arguing with others, but just live lives that are as self-centred as they wish them to be. It is OK to break the law if you can get away with it; it is OK to do anything you like if you can get away with it, and it is a waste of time discussing whether anything is “OK” since, frankly, the concept is vacuous anyway.

But there are many others who strive to affirm a strictly physicalist account of existence with the left half of their brain, so to speak, while with the right half of their brain they still talk about values as meaningful things that are worth discussing and debating. Such people often have heated arguments about politics and other issues of principle. If pressed they may say that all this is what they are programmed to do by society, evolution or upbringing. But it is all a little phoney since they believe (with the left half of the brain) that their values are without any foundation in objective terms. Two entirely different modes of discourse appear to be going on.

Does McGinn's TN position help resolve these problems, as he argues for strongly in other cases? For example when discussing the enigmatic relationship between consciousness, mind and brain, he approvingly quotes the nineteenth century scientist John Tyndall who stated that we do not possess any kind of intellectual organ capable of perceiving this relationship. The present TN suggestion would therefore be that, whatever the origin of values, we are in like manner just not mentally organised to understand it.

The particular problem here, I would say, is that it to a large extent involves "head versus heart". I have been using the terms "left brain" and "right brain" here in exactly this kind of sense, employing them in a quasi-scientific way out of politeness to the E position. If I assert position E in this language, I shall therefore be claiming that the "head" has absolutely nothing to do with values and the "heart" is mistaken. But all this is clearly using one side of the brain to repress the other, which from a strictly physicalist position might seem a rather bizarre thing to do, since all brain activity in the physicalist view ends up turning into functionalism anyway. Returning to TN, however, it should be pointed out that most people would say that we do in fact have an organ to discern values, namely the "heart" (whatever this may actually be), and that if philosophers insist on not using it then of course they will not come to any sensible answers.

All this in the end concerns what the philosophers are trying to achieve. The three relevant factors with regard to values are, firstly, discerning their existence, then seeking to ascertain their nature, and finally, acting on the particular values of a particular case. We have already mentioned these factors in the case of the M position. To take the matter seriously at all we will obviously have to bypass the E position. In fact the D position appears to be logically not very robust, and can easily turn into an E position (something that McGinn points out often occurs.) That is, values that are merely preferences are very weak things, with no real obligatory implications. Many D people may well turn out to be E people who still want to keep on good terms with their neighbours. In fact D people often appear to be sitting on the fence and adopting language that can be manoeuvred into any desired form. Now suppose TN is right in postulating that we do not have an intellectual organ that will perceive directly the *fundamental* nature of values, just as we do not have a sense organ that perceives directly the atomic nature of matter. This would nevertheless be unimportant if I am just prepared to follow my heart and am not too concerned to understand origins.

But suppose I do feel I want to understand values in their origin before I am happy to act on them. McGinn's type of agnosticism then unfortunately leaves everything up in the air. In my life, for example, I do require to make the important decision whether I can dare to be an out-and-out E-type cynic. Or possibly an E-type cynic wearing hypocritical clothes of social conformism when necessary - for in this case there exists of course no *value*-based argument against hypocrisy. Machiavelli was right! On the other hand, there is the significant option of following my heart, and

taking values seriously. So even if TN were absolutely correct at the philosophical level, this does not get us very far in practical living.

Indeed, one cannot help suspecting TN, as the position is stated, of evasiveness. If there is something inscrutable to ourselves about values, to take the present example of an inscrutable topic, then we are not in a strong position to assert that it is “nature” that is transcendent. All kinds of metaphysical backgrounds are compatible with the statement that we are unable to perceive the true essence of a particular thing or understand what it is about.

To make a real decision about values means considering all four of the DIME options seriously. Such a process will therefore imply that we must take seriously the possibility that physicalism may not be the correct philosophy of nature, and that nature is therefore more than just physics. This will therefore enable what we call the heart to be more than just the right brain, and probably the “head” to be more than just the left brain. We can maybe start by noting that no physicalist account of mental consciousness has any real plausibility, something accepted even by many physicalists although there are dissenting voices. It is entirely reasonable to suppose there is something more than physics. But this must be the subject of another essay.