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The Art of Making Values Explicit

Sue Spaid interviewed by Mateusz Salwa

MS: Your recent book (*Making Values Explicit. On How We Are Moved to Do, Act, Care, and Change*, Ethics International Press Ltd: Bradford 2025) is mainly devoted to values. Interestingly, you claim that the very notion of “values” is undervalued in philosophy as it is broad and a bit fuzzy and, consequently, it may be used in many divergent contexts. At the same time, you make this traditional concept pivotal for your project. Why?

SS: I’ve always been a sceptic of virtue theories. Everyone agrees that virtues exist, but no one really tries for them and everyone seems to find them unattainable. And if so, being virtuous is encouraged, yet not really necessary. We may say that virtues

are impossible, but what is possible? What is it that people aspire to? Is it that people reach for them even if they may not be conscious of what virtues are, yet there is “something else” motivating them? So, I think that it just seemed to me that values were motivating lots of things and people were looking elsewhere. For example, we may ask how artworks work? Do they, for example, appeal to our emotions? But is it really emotions? What worries me about emotions is that our emotions seem to be fleeting, but our values don’t seem to be fleeting. I had written a number of essays not intending to write about values, but they kept coming up. The only way I could explain certain things like disgust or artworks that challenge us or artworks that grab our attention was by referring to values. Consequently, I just decided to go deeper into this topic. But I also have read a lot of philosophy of mind and I felt that the notion of values answers some really profound questions that philosophy of mind asks too. I felt that values were a kind of linchpin between aesthetics and self-knowledge. Hopefully, my book will trigger a discussion that helps us to get closer to what it is that motivates people and what it is that frames how we do the things that we do. Ever more psychologists are talking about values underpinning emotions, so I feel I’m onto something.

MS: How would you, then, define values? One can infer it from your book, but at the same time you do not seem to offer an explicit universal definition. Is it because values are, according to you, a basic concept that cannot really be defined or that it’s because we all more or less know what we mean when we think of something like values?

SS: If you don’t feel I properly defined values, then I’ve made a mistake, because I really try to say that what interests me is qualitative, not quantitative. So it’s not like monetary value. And I also make a distinction between the singular “value” and the plural “values.” I published in my index about 30 different values that you can look up in the book. So if you look in the index, you’ll get an idea. I probably don’t give a great definition, but I try to be specific about what I mean by values. Values are what motivate us to do whatever we do.

MS: The title of your book suggests that we should make values explicit. Why?

SS: The book title is a play on Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* (1994). I thought, this may be a good way to make values explicit and I’m not the only one who has this

idea that you should make your values explicit. It also comes from Brené Brown, who teaches at the University of Houston, and she publishes a long list of values, which she suggests people use to narrow down their values first to five and then to two. In the book, I explain how I also get my students to do this. I tell them at the beginning of the semester to choose five values. And when you're reading philosophy, ask yourself: does the text you're reading affirm, confirm, or challenge your values? Right? It's about self-knowledge. How are we going to know whether we're living the life we want to live if we don't identify our values? And our values can change: they're not fixed between ages 10 and 60. Yet, they're pivotal in this triangle that I've invented in the book and whose vertices are: wellbeing, personal identity, and values. I would imagine that the people with the greatest wellbeing are those who feel like they're living their values. And of course, and I'm very strict in the book to say, this is not about morality, because someone could have great wellbeing and be a monster. So, I just reflect upon my values and I try to somehow get a grasp on them. At the same time I think our values are definitely explicit in our actions. My point is that this is how we become conscious about our values – we see the things we do. For example, it doesn't make any sense to say you value being ambitious and you don't even study for your tests or meet your deadlines. You maybe reflect upon it and think to yourself: gosh, I really got so much done this year. I didn't really realize how ambitious I am. I'm really an ambitious person. It may not be something you would like to share with other people, but, nevertheless, to understand our values, we have to look at our actions. And we need other people to look at our actions, too. I don't think it's enough for me to think "I'm a generous person," because if no one else is feeling my generosity, then it seems useless to believe I value generosity. So values are relational. We choose our values, and it doesn't make sense to say we have particular values if we are the only one who thinks we have these values. If the values aren't grasped by other people, it doesn't make sense that they're even values.

MS: One of the examples that you give in your book concerns the clash between values one claims to believe in and the way one in fact acts: we want to be eco-friendly, but at the same time we tend to buy fuel-consuming cars. How would you explain it?

SS: It is a value clash in some sense. I would just say those people don't really hold those values. They want to hold these green values, but they do not hold them. They've put some other value over them. In the sense that what you make explicit when you buy an SUV is the fact that you value huge cars associated them with, let's say, social status, the myth of security, or family safety. And you are not really aware of the fact that this means that green values are not really your values. It is a great example for someone to understand that they're paying lip service to these values.

MS: Whenever I think of values, my worry is that any discourse on them may inevitably become normative. You seem to carefully avoid this risk throughout your book. But is it at all possible to get engaged in the philosophy of values only in descriptive terms?

SS: One of my artist-philosopher friends has made it quite apparent that my book is not going to stop villains. Well, I didn't even try to write a book that would, since I don't see this book as exemplary. I see it as more a theoretical discourse in aesthetics. I don't see my aim as trying to make good people: I see it maybe as trying to make happy people, or content people, or satisfied, you know, people who can appreciate their lives better, but maybe not people who are going to be good people.

MS: Even though, at the end of the day, you seem to promote a certain set of values, for example, those which prevent you from buying a huge, powerful car because it makes you feel more secure etc. The fact that you not only analyze the role of values in human lives, which is the main dimension of your book, but you also offer a view of what sorts of values are crucial for people, is implied by your conceptual point of departure, namely the triangle "values- personal identity-wellbeing." Could you say a few words about it?

SS: I would say the book is a book about wellbeing as well. I have ultimately decided that my area of philosophy is wellbeing. And I have a very simple definition of wellbeing. It's where access and capacities come together. I imagine there are people with lots of capacities but don't have any access and they're miserable or they're unhappy or they feel underutilized. I think a lot of people feel this way; that is, they feel they have talents that they don't get to either explore or develop. So, I would say the people who are underutilized rank very low in wellbeing. In other words, this is about self-identification

and the disconnect between what we want to do and how we see ourselves and all that is related to our values, especially what we see ourselves as dedicated to. For example, let's say you see yourself as dedicated to your family, but you are so busy or preoccupied that you never make your children's birthday parties because you forget about their birthdays. You might feel pretty terrible, then, and I guess this is the point when you have this disconnect between how you see yourself, how you want others to see you, and how you feel inside. I would say that on the bottom of the triangle you have well-being and values, and the top would be personal identity that brings the two together. We have this notion of identity that implies that things never change, but this triangle is dynamic in the sense that those three points interact and may have an impact on each other. I would imagine that it is constantly happening. If you're acting and you're acting on your values and you're fairly successful at it, you're probably going to have a really good wellbeing. In other words, it's all about enacting one's values.

MS: This would, however, mean, that – in terms of one's wellbeing – you have no problem with someone thinking they are green-minded and buying themselves a huge car SUV as long as they are aware they are deceiving themselves. Is it not a way to justify the lifestyle of “eco-villains” who value huge cars and buy them because this is how they secure their wellbeing?

SS: “Eco-villains” are people with values that are contrary to the values that we would like people to have. We have to accept it, but the real question is: is there any way to change their values? On the other hand, maybe it's a good thing that they buy those SUVs because then we can see they are eco-villains. We know that they're out there. So, we have to ask ourselves how to change their triangle, that is modify the way they conceive of their wellbeing or their personal identity and what is important to them.

MS: The way one's view of one's wellbeing can be changed is in fact the topic of the last chapter of your book. How can we change people's values? How could aesthetics contribute to it?

SS: One of my arguments is that words don't reach people. Words are easy. This is actually the biggest problem in philosophy. We're very dependent on our language and we're usually very good at using language and we don't really have the tools of

aesthetics unless we become filmmakers or painters or something else. I am not sure if there are any particular aesthetic tools we could use, but there are definitely artistic means. This is, I think, the reason why art works. Artistic means are successful in ways that linguistic arguments aren't. And it's interesting because I've actually had students tell me that they prefer to learn philosophy by reading fiction. I think it's because when you're given an argument, for example, developed in a paper, it's so persuasive, and if you're a young philosopher and you haven't really developed your own views, you feel really persuaded and you think: "oh gosh, I don't even know what I think anymore." What's interesting about visual arts or any kind of, let's say non-linguistic or "wordless" (this is the word I like to use) format, is that they operate on a different level and they allow you to see how your values are not being matched. Of course, aesthetics can go both ways: it's not a pure system of changing people for the better. You can change people for the worse. But either way, this kind of wordless business is very powerful. What's more, people can resist language – you can say "no, I don't agree with that." But if it's more aesthetic or more perceptual, you meet it on the way that you want to meet it. And that's, I think, how it can change your mind because you're exposed.

MS: You devote a lot of space to art in your book. Do you think that this is a privileged field where people's values can be changed, or just one among many others? Or to put it differently: given that philosophical language-based discourses are ineffective, we have to use arts to modify people's attitude to for example, climate crisis, because it is the best option?

SS: Voluntarily speaking? Yes. Yet, I'm not interested in someone coming down and saying: "the only kind of art we're going to show is ecological." But I definitely think that if artists are given free rein to imagine and they have a space to make the things that they want to make, they can come up with novel solutions. A major aspect of my career consists in looking at how many interesting solutions artists have come up with over the years. So, I do think that artists can play a role, if they want, in dreaming up interesting solutions and showing us that we can have a better life. Maybe without the SUV we can buy. Artists have definitely shown us we can have a better life without being consumers and without shopping all the time and things like that. Do people want to live like that? That's a different story. That's always a different story, but to have the alternative helps. I also think that it cannot just be the artists. It has to be a total cultural shift.

MS: Admittedly, I don't think the arts can solve the problems, but they can help people with their wellbeing. They have an impact on our sensibility and in fact on our values. They make explicit some values, which makes us change the way we identify values that are important to us. Would you agree?

SS: Definitely. I only know US statistics, but I can say that people are always surprised to learn that more people visit art institutions than go to professional football games or events like that. When people enter the art spaces, they have a different openness, a different attitude that allows them to be exposed to things. The arts have played a role in so many things, making people more accepting of LGBT communities, for example. There's no doubt in my mind that if there weren't any LGBT artists making art about LGBT situations, people would still be unfamiliar with them. I don't understand why some philosophers claim that art activism doesn't work. I definitely think art activism works.

MS: An important field of your philosophical and curatorial activities is the relationships between aesthetics and environments. Is it still important to you?

SS: Well, I'm not the biggest fan of environmental aesthetics if we understand it as looking for the answers to such questions as "What aesthetic values does or should an environment have?", "How should we aesthetically appreciate an environment?", etc. At the same time, I feel we should be trying to find ways to protect our environments, to fix our environments and not, for example, to see the beauty in degraded sites, as some environmental aestheticians claim. Thus, I have moved away from environmental aesthetics. I'm more at home with environmental ethics, now. I've decided that having the mindset of protection is more useful than aesthetics. At the same time, I use the term "care aesthetics," which I came up with in rebellion against care ethics. I think that one of the great virtues of aesthetics is that we assess real things whose wellbeing we can measure. Well, we can't actually measure wellbeing, but we can try to evaluate the wellbeing of something. This applies to environmental wellbeing, too, the field I'm currently developing.

Philosophers have been slow to accept the idea that you can have environmental wellbeing and environmental illbeing. Every time I tried to publish a paper where I mentioned environmental illbeing, my paper was rejected. The reviewers said

there's no such thing. Finally, I decided that illbeing is at least a graspable concept. If a scientist says this place exhibits ecosystem functioning, it doesn't really mean anything to anyone, unless they know the science behind it. But if you could just say that we appreciate this place because of its wellbeing or we don't appreciate this place because of its illbeing, and here are examples of its illbeing, I imagine humans behaving empathically toward those environments in need of either protection or care. If we consider wellbeing flourishing and illbeing a lack of flourishing, then we can show how this environment is flourishing, whereas that one over there is not. I really believe people can be more empathic, but I may be wrong. Maybe there's nothing to make humans empathic about the environment. Anyway, I'd like to try to help scientists make links to the environment that lets people understand things better. At least, that's where I'm headed.



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