

## **BEYOND RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM: VALUE AND MEANING IN GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY AND DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY\***

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This paper has two tasks. First and foremost is to draw attention to a critical empirical question for ethics and the psychology of values, one that relates directly to the credibility of human values and our understanding of value diversity. It concerns the relation of meaning and value. First explicated by the Gestalt psychologist Karl DUNCKER in his 1939 critique of ethical relativism, later developed by Solomon ASCH, the issue is still regularly overlooked by psychology, and, may be receding from view in philosophy as well (see ELLIS, 1992).

My second task concerns the role of depth psychological processes in value experience. While Gestalt psychologists had little to say about the unconscious – [Remember that Gestalt psychology is *not* Gestalt therapy] – I believe that Gestalt theory's formulations provide a useful means of conceptualizing and exploring this likely relationship.

In 1939, Karl DUNCKER published an enquiry into ethical relativism. His starting point was the accepted fact that values tend to differ and change. On the basis of this moral diversity and inevitable conflict, some have concluded in favor of ethical relativism, that there is “nothing invariable within the psychological content of morality” (p. 39). But before relativism can be accepted, we must clarify the nature of this ethical variability, by reexamining the role of meaning and context in value experience.

The critical question that DUNCKER posed was whether practices that receive opposing valuations by different groups have the same meaning to those groups. If the meaning of the practice is the same for those who value it differently – that is, if differing valuations may be attached to the same object of judgment – then those value differences could be considered basic or fundamental, and the relativist thesis would be supported.

But what if such meaning constancy does not apply? What if differences in valuation signal differences in comprehension of the situation, as a function of differences in the context in which it is understood? If meaning were thus found to covary with valuation, the relativist thesis would be called into question: Value differences

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would be attributable – not to basic differences in ethical principle – but to secondary differences in comprehension of the situation.

DUNCKER reviewed the evidence to see whether the conclusion of meaning constancy and relativism was fully warranted, and decided it was not. He found that relativist accounts failed to consider the situational meanings of acts, that is, “relevant features of the actual psychological situation with reference to which the subject behaves” (pp. 43-44). More careful attention to the contexts in which meanings and valuations arise yields evidence of an “invariant relation between meaning and value” (p. 44). Where values differ, so do underlying meanings, as a function of differences in context.

For example, in Biblical times, to take interest on money lent was to commit the sin of usury. Yet today this practice is routinely accepted. The shift in value must be seen in light of its changed role. In early days loans generally arose out of vital need, whereas in capitalism loans are employed “as capital for profitable production” (p. 40). It is thus fitting to provide the lender a share of the profits:

“Interest no longer means an exploitation of necessities or passions. It has changed its typical meaning. ... In our example we have not two different ethical valuations of usury, but two different meanings of money-lending each of which receives its specific valuation.” (p. 41)

Let us apply DUNCKER’s analysis to a more current example of value conflict: abortion. Evaluations of that practice (e.g., pro-choice vs. right-to-life) often turn on contrasting beliefs about the fetus, and, specifically, whether it is viewed as a fully human being at the time abortion is considered. Right-to-life proponents generally affirm this fully human status, while pro-choice supporters generally deny it. These opposing beliefs represent a critical part of context within which abortion derives its meaning and valuation.

In rejecting relativism, DUNCKER offers the alternative hypothesis of an invariant relation between meaning and value. Differences in the valuation of a situation may reflect differences in its meaning, which follow from differences in the context in which it is understood. If so then value differences are not due to differences in ethical principle – but to differences in context of interpretation. In sum, value depends upon meaning, and meaning depends upon context. Gestalt psychology thus advances this idea of a “relational determination” of meaning and value (ASCH, 1952, p. 375).

How does this Gestalt formulation accord with more recent analysis? The philosophers Richard BRANDT (1967) and William FRANKENA (1973) each disentangle three distinct propositions associated with ethical relativism. The first and most basic thesis, *descriptive relativism*, claims that value differences between groups may be basic or fundamental, as opposed to derivative or non-fundamental (or with LINTON, 1952; or ELLIS, 1992, intrinsic vs. extrinsic). This conclusion of basic differences requires empirical evidence that objects receiving conflicting evaluations still have the same meaning (BRANDT, 1961). If instead meaning covaries with valuation, value differences would not be absolute, since the different evaluations would refer to different objects of judgment. Value differences would reflect secondary differences in comprehension or perceived facts, as opposed to the prima-

ry differences in ethics that are needed to prove descriptive relativism. This formulation clearly matches DUNCKER's, and represents what Solomon ASCH (1952) describes as the "essential proposition of ethical relativism", that "one can connect to the identical situation different and opposed evaluations" (p. 376).

The descriptive thesis is crucial because, as generally formulated, basic value differences must be assumed before the other two theses come into play. Granting such basic differences, a second thesis, *metaethical relativism*, goes on to claim there is no valid way of determining which of two conflicting evaluations is correct. A third thesis, *normative relativism*, makes – perhaps inconsistently (see FRANKENA, 1973; RENTELN, 1988; WILLIAMS, 1972) – a normative claim, for example that one should follow the values of one's group, or should tolerate the values of other groups. Ignorance or conflation of these three propositions is a major source of conceptual confusion in the psychology of values.<sup>1</sup>

What of the psychological investigation of the empirical question of descriptive relativism vs. relational determination? While the issue has arisen in social psychological work tangential to present concerns [i.e., research in impression formation (e.g., ANDERSON, 1981; ASCH, 1946; HAMILTON & ZANNA, 1974) and social influence (ASCH, 1940; GRIFFIN & BUEHLER, 1993; BUEHLER & GRIFFIN, 1994)], the psychology of values tends to ignore the question, to misunderstand it, or to assume meaning constancy without any direct test (cf. ROKEACH, 1973, 1979a; SCHWARTZ, 1994a, 1994b). The ROKEACH Value Survey (the RVS) is a case in point. There respondents rank pre-selected value terms in order of personal importance. Without direct evidence, ROKEACH (1973, 1979a) assumes that these values have the same fixed meaning for all respondents. This implies that meanings are constant despite variations in rank. That assumption persists in the extensive cross-cultural research of SCHWARTZ, who uses a modified form of the RVS. My own research with the RVS (RAGSDALE, 1985) casts doubt on the notion of meaning constancy. I asked subjects to interpret the values they ranked. The *equality* that Jane ranks first is far different from the *equality* that Joan ranks last. Meaning tended to co-vary with rank.

Before moving on, I want to make clear that meaning constancy, the key assumption of descriptive relativism, is also a prime ingredient of moral absolutism as well. Relational determination represents an alternative to a viewpoint common to both.

This requires a closer look at meaning constancy. Note first that meaning constancy can refer to two different constancies: a constancy with respect to contexts, and also with respect to valuations. In the first case, the meaning of an object is assumed to be independent of context. In the second, this meaning is assumed to be susceptible to opposing valuations. ASCH's (1952) historical sketch helps us see

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<sup>1</sup>SHWEDER (1991) provides a particularly apt example of this problem: "A primary goal of the relativist is to seek, and display, more and more information about the details of other peoples' objectives, premises, .. *meanings* [italics added], and so on; so much detail that the ideas and conduct of the others come to make sense given the context (premises, standards)" (p. 119). SHWEDER apparently is making a case for metaethical relativism that undermines the descriptive thesis upon which it normally rests.

meaning constancy as a shared assumption of each moral camp. According to him, absolutism asserts:

“... that we are capable of grasping certain actions as unconditionally right and other acts as intrinsically wrong. This is a view difficult to maintain in the light of historical evidence... . Knowledge of divergent social practices has cast increasing doubt on the absolutist interpretation and provoked a reaction against it. The reaction has taken the form of a denial that there are any fixed principles of value in human relations and of the assertion that these are historically conditioned or relative to the society.” (p. 367)

My first point concerns absolutism and its unconditional rights and wrongs. Here practices are deemed right or wrong *in themselves*, that is, regardless of the particulars of local context. Indeed absoluteness cannot be claimed if context is allowed to introduce contingencies and extenuating circumstances. Absolutism implies, in a sense, that ultimate meanings have been reached, meanings that apply regardless of other conditions. Meaning constancy, in the sense of context-independent meaning, appears to be a defining characteristic of absolutism.

Next comes relativism. It rests its case on its collection of these local absolutisms and their apparent contradictions. By their very nature as absolute, unconditional, categorical claims, they are bound at times to conflict with one another. Ask members of one culture about the values of another and they will likely sense basic differences. The social scientist may well concur. Divergent practices may appear incommensurable if close attention is not paid to internal meanings, intentions, and contexts. Yet this is precisely what absolutism overlooks. Things are deemed right or wrong regardless of context. The absolutist assumption of context-free values leads inevitably to the relativist assumption of fundamental oppositions in evaluation. Meaning constancy is a shared assumption of both.

ASCH (1952) helps clarify the common basis of the two extremes. Although absolutism and relativism are “entirely opposed in their conclusions”, they are “at one on an essential point of theory”:

“They reach their opposed conclusions on the basis of the same technical assumption of elementarism; therefore they agree that the sole alternatives are between them. Indeed it would be fair to say that each rests its case on the failure of the other.” (p. 383)

Elementarism, which assumes that mental events are composed of discrete, independent, non-interactive units, is a foundation assumption of traditional Western psychology. Meaning constancy simply mirrors this postulate. Whether it takes the form of absolutism or relativism, this way of thinking can only lead to an absolutization of meaning and its implication of basic value differences. By absolutization, I refer to the reification of objects of judgment – be they persons or practices – so as to be carriers of fixed meanings and values, regardless of the varied contexts or conditions in which they appear. Gestalt psychology was founded as a protest against elementarism. The relational determination they propose breaks free of this narrow dichotomy.

At this point a rather sticky question arises. If relational determination is true, why is its truth not self-evident? If the meaning of a thing depends upon its context, why are we so readily seduced by the reified extremes of absolutism or relativism? Why – in both scholarly work and naïve perception – is our capacity for *relational*

*understanding* (cf. ASCH, 1952, p. 434) so limited that we so often misconstrue reality to attribute to (merely) relational facts an absolute, independent, and context-free status. This is a problem that ASCH (1952) laments, but does not try to explain:

“... It is hard to escape the conclusion that our naïve understanding of complex situations fails to take adequately into account their structured character and that we often endow social events with an absoluteness that is unwarranted. ... We shall not consider the reason for this shortcoming, but will attempt instead to show why we should think more resolutely in terms of relational determination if we are to do justice to social realities.” (pp. 442-443)

It is, however, not enough to assert the truth of relational determination, or to promote its application. It is necessary to see how relational determination is at work in the human experience that is blind to its truth, at those times when the capacity for relational understanding is exhausted and persons fall back upon an absolutism of meaning and value. After all, the case for relational determination is drawn not so much from moral systems that fully embrace the truth of that principle as from the wealth of presumably absolutist outlooks that cling to their own particular reifications of meaning and value as ultimate. It is on the basis of meaning-value invariance within these absolutized views that Gestalt theory looks to transcend the absolutism-relativism dichotomy. Why is it – and indeed how is it – that relational determination so often appears in the trappings of absolutized experience, and rarely if ever in viewpoints that fully bear its insight? How is the fact of absolutism to be reconciled with the truth of relationality?

If all meanings are relationally determined, then Gestalt theory is challenged to uncover the relational determination of that misconstrual. To use relational determination to explain this systematic error as it applies to value experience, we may need to widen the context of that determination to include unconscious processes and their role in the absolutization process. I know of no better introduction to this area than Erich NEUMANN's *Depth Psychology and A New Ethic* (1990). There NEUMANN examines the psychological basis of what he calls the “old ethic”.

The old ethic is the seat of moral absolutism in the popular mind. Across its countless expressions, including the Judeo-Christian ethic, is its “assertion of the absolute character of certain values which are represented ... as moral oughts” (p. 33). In all cases, good is defined deontologically as “a codifiable and transmittable value which governs human conduct in a ‘universal’ manner” (p. 33).

The individual's challenge here is to perfect the good by eliminating incompatible qualities. The negative is excluded either of two methods: suppression and repression.

Repression is the most common means of moral enculturation. Here the individual comes to identify with societal values and disowns what fails to fit. The identification process leads to the formation of a persona, which the person often assumes is simply who he or she is, and the parallel, largely unconscious constellation of a shadow, representing all that must be denied to maintain the positive identification.

The existence of the shadow, however unconscious, still stirs guilt. Echoing JUNG's claim that “what is unconscious is projected”, NEUMANN suggests that this guilt is discharged by projection of the shadow, by means of “the classic psychological expedient – the institution of the scapegoat” (p. 50).

I describe NEUMANN's work mainly to illustrate the role of unconscious processes in the absolutization of meaning. The objects of projection that NEUMANN describes may be a case in point. The meanings of these objects are rigidly maintained and generally oblivious to changes in situational context. If however relational determination is ultimately true, then meaning is *not* derivable from things in isolation. The meaning of a thing – its existence as a phenomenal object – depends upon its context. If meaning appears fixed and context-free, this may be due to the ongoing projection of a fixed context of interpretation onto the object and the various narrower contexts in which it is nested. Likewise the person may hold tight to a particular image of self through introjection of such a context.

What I am suggesting is that our perceptions do reflect meaning constancy of a sort, due not to context-free imputation of meaning, but to projection of fixed contexts in which to interpret world and self. This projective process is likely to be rigidly maintained, owing to its ego-defensive role, which thus insures the stability, or constancy, of resulting meanings. Likewise, since projection is unconscious, persons may be oblivious to this process and its role in shaping meanings. In short, what pretends to be context-free is in fact context-bound, only the binding context is unconscious. I describe the process that yields such reified meanings as projective contextualization.

Let us consider three examples. First is prejudice. Here a secondary characteristic (e.g., race, religion, gender, sexual orientation) gets absolutized to become a defining quality, as though its presence or absence constituted a “real” difference. It becomes a context for stereotypical interpretation of persons and acts, as though this property alone explained them. Thus a person or group gets locked into an absolute sense of moral superiority-entitlement-acceptability or inferiority-blameworthiness-unacceptability.

Another example concerns fear and desire. In proportion to the strength of the emotion, one narrows one's experience of the object to the terms of the fear or desire. One comes to relate to it mainly in the context of that need or aversion or fear, overlooking countless other forms of relation. If the object is a person, he or she may become objectified. Likewise, others who are seen to impede attainment or avoidance may be reduced to mere obstacles. And to the extent one experiences oneself in the grip of these states, or their objects, the self is absolutized. Actual relationship with others is more or less precluded.

Another kind of absolutizing projection is found in the aftermath of childhood abuse. Here the child cannot integrate the incomprehensible pain and betrayal of the experience. What cannot be consciously abided is instead frozen over. In being de-realized, it becomes absolutized. The undigested experience becomes an organizing context for interpreting later experience, which thus comes to reflect the original form of relation as though it represented an existential condition. This may involve an implicit “giving up” on other persons, as though their nature is revealed in a way that rules out the possibility of openness toward them. Or a giving up on oneself, with the role of victim remaining a fixture in the defensive organization of the personality for as long as the original experience remains unbearable.

In each of these examples there is a narrowing of the person's view of another person or thing, and a corresponding narrowing of one's sense of self. The person lacks the ability to see the object with sufficient openness and flexibility to fully tolerate its potentiality for vastly different meanings in different contexts. The meanings of self and other, so constrained, carry a sense of ultimacy or finality that betrays their absolutized status. There is an enforced psychological insulation from the other, with decreased capacity for understanding or empathy. One is to some degree trapped inside such outlooks, since one's capacity to learn from the situation – to discover the fitting relations that reflect its relational determination – is obstructed. Resulting behavior may increase mutual hostility and self-fulfilling prophecies. Moreover, since the outer battle lines reflect inner divisions, these same consequences strike at the person's relation to self, whose overall effect is one of heightened self-alienation.

There is perhaps another way of relating to self and world. As the person can tolerate the withdrawal of projections and the integration of those contents, consciousness will increase by dint of this new tolerance for relational determination. Another way of relating to self and world can emerge. In the process we find that neither meaning nor value disappear. What fades is their absolutization or reification. This applies both to the categories of good and bad, and to the persons and practices to which those categories are applied. Rather than brand something bad, as though its badness reflected its intrinsic nature, we become open to consider the causes and conditions that give rise to that property. Here the contexts in which we experience the other allow for the inclusion of the self – without need of insulation or enforced boundary. Without this sense of an absolute dividing line separating self from other, one is in a position to make contact with the actual situation, rather than with some portion of one's own denied and projected psyche. One is also capable of being moved by the situation, not on the basis of ego-threat, but in response to its own objective demands. This relational understanding reflects an awareness of, or tolerance for, the relational determinants of meaning, of the causes and conditions that give rise to perceived events. Perception that is informed by this awareness is thus open to experience. Such openness toward the world reflects an openness in relation to oneself, since perception no longer must serve the security interests of the ego.

It may seem as though I have strayed far from NEUMANN's views of moral enculturation to arrive at examples of pathological processes. In fact these examples do not seem far removed from normal life. Who of us with any measure of self-awareness does not experience degrees of narrow-mindedness, victimization, and obsessive preoccupation? I wonder how many other forms of cognitive distortion, in both "normal" and pathological functioning, might involve such processes of projective contextualization and absolutization.

In closing, I want to make clear that relational determination is not in itself a solution to the problem of value. For one thing, relational determination does not solve, or seek to explain away, the metaethical question of validity. The absence of absolute value differences does not imply that all values are equally valid. Relational determination simply refocuses the question onto underlying meanings and the challenge of establishing validity or veridicality there. Only now we must recognize

that psyche is the medium in which meanings arise and actions are taken, and psyche's own demands, limitations, and individual differences must enter the equation. Just how far we can go toward stating principles to resolve questions of validity of conflicting meanings – without succumbing again to the absolutist error – is by no means clear.

I will risk a conjecture. If relational determination is to weigh in at all on the metaethical question of validity, it may be to invite consideration of the proposition that ultimately no meaning can rightly claim full validity that is not in full accord with the sheer relationality of all experience. Conscious meanings may ultimately need to bear and embody full awareness of their own relationality, and thus to shed all manner of absolutization as has adhered to human experience throughout history. Psychological integration may thus become the ultimate moral challenge. If so, that awareness must be tempered by an appreciation of the immensity of the task of full relational understanding, as has been attained by few if any of our species.

In the meantime, we see that relational determination still cannot assume the very absoluteness that it itself rejects. It cannot even brand moral absolutism to be categorically wrong. Like everything else, absolutism is good or bad in relation to its context. Individuals and societies have needed, and surely continue to need, the concreteness of its reifications, in the form of ironclad norms or principles, to establish and maintain a moral sensibility and to bridle harmful impulses. Absolutism, in this context, represents a moral achievement. And as it continues to support the human strivings for compassion and care, it serves well. Yet, while necessary, it eventually reveals its insufficiency. As it becomes a means of hiding our darkness from ourselves and inflicting it upon others, it becomes bad. Perhaps at such times we are capable of something better. If so it may well entail an increased openness, bred of deeper and more conscious acceptance of the relational determination of meaning and value.

### *Zusammenfassung*

Dieser Text untersucht zunächst die gestalttheoretischen Beiträge zur Psychologie der Werte, insbesondere Karl DUNCKERs (1939) Arbeit über die Beziehung zwischen Bedeutung und Wert und die Rolle des Kontextes bei deren Erfassung. DUNCKER lenkte die Aufmerksamkeit auf eine fragwürdige implizite Annahme des ethischen Relativismus: die Annahme der Bedeutungs-Konstanz. Diese Prämisse zurückweisend entwickelte DUNCKER die Hypothese einer invarianten Beziehung zwischen Bedeutung und Wert. Diese These, die die Grundlage des Gestaltprinzips einer relationalen Determinierung von Bedeutung und Wert (ASCH, 1952) darstellt, bietet eine Alternative nicht nur zum Relativismus, sondern auch zum Absolutismus, teilen diese doch beide dieselbe fragwürdige Annahme der Bedeutungs-Konstanz.

Der Beitrag stellt sich noch eine zweite Aufgabe: Er untersucht die Rolle tiefenpsychologischer Prozesse in der relationalen Erfassung von Bedeutung. Auch wenn die These der relationalen Erfassung zutrifft, gibt es dabei doch eindeutig auch Fälle, wo die Erfassung der Bedeutung nicht ausschließlich auf voll bewußten Erfahrungsvorgängen beruht. Wenn aber die Rolle des Kontextes unerkannt bleibt, können relationale Charakteristiken als den Sachen selbst innewohnende Eigenschaften erscheinen und so die phänomenale Grundlage für die Illusion der Bedeutungs-Konstanz bilden. Auf die tiefenpsychologische Arbeit von Erich NEUMANN (1969) gestützt, erforscht der Autor psychodynamische Prozesse, mit deren Hilfe man sich die menschliche Neigung erklären kann, Erfahrungen zu verabsolutieren und Bedeutungen und Werte als kontextunabhängige Fakten aufzufassen.

### *Summary*

This paper first re-examines Gestalt contributions to the psychology of values, specifically Karl DUNCKER's (1939) work on the relation of meaning and value, and the role of context in their apprehension. DUNCKER drew attention to a critical, previously implicit assumption of ethical relativism: that of meaning constancy. Rejecting this proposition, he advanced the hypothesis of an invariant relation between meaning and value. That thesis, which is the basis of the Gestalt principle of relational determination of meaning and value (ASCH, 1952), provides an alternative not only to relativism, but absolutism as well, since both share the same questionable assumption of meaning constancy.

A second task is to explore the role of depth psychological processes in the relational determination of meaning. Even if relational determination is true, there are clearly times when that determination is not a matter of full conscious experience. Where the role of context goes unrecognized, relational characteristics may appear as indwelling properties of things themselves, thus providing a phenomenal basis for the illusion of meaning constancy. Drawing upon the depth psychological work of Erich NEUMANN (1969), I explore psychodynamic processes that might help account for the human tendencies to absolutize experience and to impute meanings and valuations as though they were context-free facts.

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