



Three questions about the social life of values

LSE Research Online URL for this paper: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/109298/>

Version: Published Version

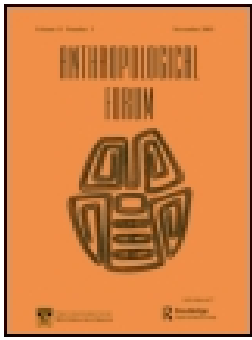
Article:

Walker, Harry ORCID: 0000-0001-9879-4045 (2021) Three questions about the social life of values. *Anthropological Forum*, 31 (1). 94 - 105. ISSN 0066-4677

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2021.1893154>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>



Anthropological Forum

A Journal of Social Anthropology and Comparative Sociology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/canf20>

Three Questions About the Social Life of Values

Harry Walker

To cite this article: Harry Walker (2021): Three Questions About the Social Life of Values, Anthropological Forum, DOI: [10.1080/00664677.2021.1893154](https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2021.1893154)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2021.1893154>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Mar 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 71



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Three Questions About the Social Life of Values

Harry Walker

Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This afterword to the Qualifying Sociality through Values special issue reflects on the challenge, aptly considered by each contributor, to revamp and rejuvenate the sociality concept in light of the ethical turn. It poses three questions. Firstly, just how important are values for sociality? That is, to what extent is social action really conceived and executed through values? Secondly, how does sociality itself figure as a value, and how should we accommodate values that are not obviously prosocial such as separation and withdrawal? Thirdly, what is the relationship between competing values – when and how (if at all) do values genuinely conflict rather than complement or reinforce one other, and how do people then choose between them? These questions are crucial, I suggest, if we are to advance our understanding of how people embark on the shared project of crafting good and meaningful lives.

KEYWORDS

Values; sociality; detachment; value pluralism; value monism

Introduction: Unpacking Vernacular Socialities Through Values

The concept of sociality continues to evolve in intriguing new directions. One virtue of this collection is that it directs our attention to why the concept remains relevant and how it can be revamped in the wake of both the ethical and ontological turns through an analytical focus on values, opening up new theoretical vistas and lines of enquiry along the way. This is, to be sure, an ambitious aim: despite (or perhaps because of) their considerable analytical appeal, both concepts – sociality and values – have proved difficult to pin down, with each responsible for a proliferation of sometimes competing definitions. Exploring their relationship, their mutual entwinement, might seem an unwieldy undertaking, to say the least. Yet it is also a crucially important one. As the papers gathered here make clear, both concepts go to the heart of the question of how people in vastly different circumstances not only seek to create good and meaningful lives, as joint projects that demand the company of others, but how they justify to others the choices they make in doing so.

The collection thus helpfully takes up and rethinks the concept of sociality – as developed especially in contributions by Strathern (1990), Ingold (1997), and Long and Moore (2013) among others – in ways that take account of some important recent developments

CONTACT Harry Walker  h.l.walker@lse.ac.uk  Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

in the discipline. One such development is the turn towards materiality, and concomitant recognition of the ways in which ostensibly ‘immaterial’ values or ideas are typically deeply embedded in concrete material configurations and practices. This is drawn out particularly clearly in the contributions by Lounela (2021) and Gibson (2021), both of whom show how distinct worlds of value correspond to, and arise within, distinct configurations of the natural and man-made environment and the forms of social life these enable; it also informs Herrmans’s (2021) account, which highlights how ritual action in particular can serve as a key domain for the materialisation of value.

Very much related to this is the way the ontological turn has so compellingly refocused attention on the diverse ways in which non-humans are implicated within human lives and ideational worlds, while calling into question the modernist idea of the ‘social’ as a category founded in, and intelligible through, an opposition to the ‘natural’. Several papers here show how understandings of human sociality may be deepened or thrown into relief when we take relationships with non-humans, or ‘more-than-human sociality’, into account. This comes through nicely in Herrmans’ account of the values of sharing and reciprocity as revealed through Luangans’ relations with spirits, as well as Remme’s (2021) account of how unstable relations with spirits and ancestors illuminate some of the dangers that pervade human sociality also, and which arise from an analogous need to strike a cautious balance between connection and distance.

Though not made explicit in any of the contributions, there are important ways in which they speak to a thriving interdisciplinary literature around human cooperation. A number of prominent accounts have sought to tie the emergence of cooperation closely to morality and, especially, fairness, which are posited as having evolved precisely with that function (see *inter alia* Tomasello and Vaish 2013; Henrich and Henrich 2007; Baumard and Sperber 2013; Stafford, Judd, and Bell 2018; Gellner et al. 2020). To take one recent example, Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse (2019) seek to demonstrate systematically that across a very wide range of cultural contexts, ‘specific forms of cooperative behaviour (helping kin, helping your group, reciprocating, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing disputed resources, and respecting prior possession) will be considered morally good wherever they arise’ (48). Moreover, ‘each type of cooperation explains a corresponding type of morality: (1) family values, (2) group loyalty, (3) reciprocity, (4) bravery, (5) respect, (6) fairness, and (7) property rights’ (2019, 48). There is clearly much common ground here, and a potentially fruitful dialogue to be had. That said, however, the concept of cooperation as it figures in this literature starts, as I read it, from almost opposite premises to the concept of sociality as taken up in this volume; specifically, it postulates cooperation as a problem to be overcome, and morality as a key tool in the solution, which in turn relies on a conception of autonomous, fully formed individuals who then enter into relation. The concept of sociality, meanwhile, purports to start from the premise that people are formed through their relations with others, and in this way adds an important generative quality to social relationships, one that appears to be lacking in most theories of cooperation. Moreover, as several of the papers gathered here show, cooperative, prosocial behaviour is not always or exclusively positively valued – an important topic I return to below.

While an ethnographic diversity in terms of societal scale and complexity is a key strength of this collection, with contexts ranging from Danish classrooms to Dayak villages, there is a discernible Southeast Asian inflection, with three of the five papers based on fieldwork in Indonesia and one from the Philippines. These are arguably contexts in which

anthropological discussions of such ‘classic’ values as equality and hierarchy, or personal autonomy, have been relatively salient. Most contributors, meanwhile, could be situated within a broadly Nordic social milieu that is known (whether fairly or otherwise) for its integrative values of egalitarianism and individualism (see also Anderson (2021) in this volume). This lends a helpful coherence to the analyses, despite the diversity of approaches, while also helping to contextualise some of the key themes and arguments. For example, the collection effectively takes on board some key insights from recent work on morality and ethics including, especially, an emphasis on the moral and ethical character of much of everyday life: the idea, as Laidlaw (2014, 3) put it, that ethical considerations pervade human sociality quite simply because people are evaluative. It is interesting that relatively little of the most influential recent work in the anthropology of ethics seems to have emerged out of fieldwork in the kinds of contexts we are mostly dealing with here – which are, on the other hand, precisely where the concept of sociality has had greatest purchase. At the same time, the latter arguably already had something like a concept of value built into it, insofar as it stemmed from a recognition that it was something more than social structures and patterned obligations that were motivating people to act in recognisable ways; that there was a distinctive pattern to the flow of social life itself that had to do with the kind of life they held dear and the kind of person they wanted to be. In other words, the usefulness of the concept of sociality has partly stemmed, I would suggest, from a recognition that it is actually values like autonomy that give certain societies their distinctive flavour or ethos, and enable us to recognise something distinctive that guides peoples’ actions and in some important sense unites them in a common project, even in the absence of rigid social structures or hierarchies or coercive authority.

While the authors here have thus each developed their own way of theorising the concept of sociality and its relationship to values, and have identified as salient a range of different themes, there is clearly a great deal of common ground. It is especially fortunate, given the potential for abstraction inherent in the theme itself, that the analyses rarely stray far from the grounded and robust ethnographic data on which they are based; among other things, this makes it possible to probe the pieces further and potentially along lines not explicitly developed by their authors. I propose, then, in what follows, to reflect on three questions which, I would like to suggest, the articles gathered here collectively pose, and help us to think through. I offer these as lines of enquiry and tools for thought, and only tentatively point to possible answers. I begin by asking after the importance of values for sociality: that is, to what extent is social action really conceived and executed through values? Secondly, how does sociality itself figure as a value – and how should we accommodate values that are not obviously prosocial, such as separation, withdrawal, or conflict? Thirdly, what is the relationship between competing values – when and how, if at all, do values genuinely conflict, rather than complementing or reinforcing one other, and how do people then choose between them? All three questions are crucially important for an adequate account of the myriad ways in which people craft shared lives that are meaningful and worthwhile.

Question 1. Just How Pervasive Are Values in Human (and More-than-Human) Sociality?

Just how important, really, are values? What is the extent of the role they play in shaping or giving expression to sociality? Such questions seem especially pertinent against the

backdrop of an ethical turn in which it is sometimes proposed that people tend to be genuinely concerned with questions of what is right or good in their lives, and are predisposed to evaluate the actions of others along just these lines. Some might say, in retort, that on the contrary, many people appear to engage in little ethical reflection or deliberation at all, and would rather just get on with it, as it were. In crude terms this echoes one of the more high-profile debates in the field around the problem of where to locate the ethical: as imbuing the flow of ‘ordinary’, everyday life (e.g. Lambek 2010; Das 2012); or as likely to become salient, a matter of conscious reflection, only in moments of crisis, in the wake of ‘moral breakdown’ (e.g. Zigon 2007). While claims for the relative salience of the ethical in people’s lives helped to make the case for the importance of the anthropology of ethics as an emerging sub-discipline, it is arguably also the case that many of those involved carried out fieldwork in religious settings where moral concerns are perhaps unusually salient.

On virtually all sides of this debate, it must be noted, there has been a more or less determined attempt to break with Durkheim’s analysis of the religious and thus moral foundations of social order, for instance as developed in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. According to Laidlaw (2014), Durkheim’s idea of morality was basically a codified representation of society itself, and conceiving the ‘moral’ as virtually coterminous with the ‘social’ in that way leaves little room for an account of deliberation or self-fashioning, or ethical freedom. The question might well be asked, then: does examining sociality through values imply something like a return to Durkheim – an attempt, at least, to resuscitate what was most valuable in his approach? The literature on cooperation mentioned above does seem somewhat to vindicate his suggestion that people’s conceptions of the good are closely tied to, perhaps even typically expressions of, forms of prosocial behaviour. To paraphrase Yan (2011), there is perhaps only so far we can move away from Durkheim, and a focus on sociality in light of values appears in some ways to embed a Durkheimian concern with questions of integration, solidarity, and consensus. Yet if the authors in this volume have for the most part chosen not to examine explicitly instances of deviance or difference, or peoples’ capacity to articulate and pursue values that are potentially at odds with the dominant value system – their ethical freedom – there is also a clear concern to explore instances where people have come into conflict because of their different values, or – even more interestingly, perhaps – their differing interpretations of the same value. As Remme makes clear in his exploration of a brutal murder in this volume, such conflicting interpretations can lend instability and even high drama to dominant forms of sociality, and could be considered key to its constitution.

To return, then, to the question about the scope and reach of the moral and ethical fields in everyday sociality, we might suggest that this is indeed usefully approached through values. It draws attention to the question of motivation, in the first instance – or why people act as they do – and it may be useful, in this connection, to recall Weber’s typology of social action. Weber is of course often invoked as a key ancestor for theories of value (e.g. Robbins 2018), and it is well worth bearing in mind that he also developed some of the most influential and incisive writing on the nature of the social, not least concerning the ways in which symbolic principles more generally can condition and shape enduring patterns of social order. In *Economy and Society*, he proposed that social action can be conceptually differentiated into four ideal types which

more or less correspond to degrees of conscious reflection. Only one of these four (so-called 'value-rational' action, where an action has an inherent value independent of any outcome) was explicitly formulated in relation to a concept of value; and it was seen as less rational or 'logical' than instrumentally-rational action, the scope of which he felt was ever growing in the modern world.¹

Might the suggestion that people tend to act with values in mind thus be something of an overstatement? Whatever the theoretical value of Weber's scheme, however, it is not methodologically straightforward to determine the degree of deliberation or conscious reflection at work when observing the action of others. Rich ethnography does perhaps permit a degree of insight, and at least some papers in this collection make a case for the prominence of social action motivated by values. Their importance as drivers of particular forms of sociality is strongly implied in Gibson's account of the Indonesian Makassar, where at least some individuals were motivated to pursue social status, salvation, and national development within the Austronesian, Islamic and 'modern' spheres respectively. Anderson shows how children must learn to behave towards others in ways that express and enact what she terms 'Danish democratic values' – although she also rightly questions whether these values should really be seen as motivating action, and thus conceptually prior to it. Danish teachers seek to imbue these values as they teach children which forms of behaviour are acceptable; and their uptake and internalisation is clear in the latter's comments that, for instance, everyone's efforts in some task are 'equally good' – even if their actions do not quite bear that out in practice. This might be taken as suggesting that values may play a more important role in interpreting and especially justifying action post-hoc, rather than in motivating it *per se*.

In the other contexts in which sociality has a less deliberative and intentional aspect, values appears to be less clearly or consciously articulated, albeit still present in some way: Remme, for instance, proposes that contrastive values of tradition and autonomy 'are involved in shaping social actions in various and not always compatible ways'; Herrmans identifies the values of modesty and proportionality as underwriting Luangan sociality and its dynamics of quiet restraint; and Lounela proposes that practices of sharing and working together manifest values of relationality or solidarity, which in turn relate closely to equality. I did wonder, however, about the extent to which people could really be said to hold values such as these in mind, when choosing a course of action, or even when engaging in acts of justification and critique. To pursue the question further, it would be helpful to hear more about how these values are expressed in the local vernacular, and how and when – in which contexts, if any – they enter into discourse.

Question 2. How Does Sociality Itself Figure as a Value?

People everywhere, these papers seem to suggest, operate with an emic concept of sociality that almost inevitably lends itself to forms of evaluation. How and in what ways, then, is sociality itself valued? And how should we accommodate apparently conflicting values such as separation, withdrawal or conflict? In the first instance, people do seem often to make evaluative judgements about particular forms of sociality that are seen as desirable in a particular context: as in Anderson's account of Danish classrooms, where there is a very explicit sense that there is a 'right' way of being social and that

this must be taught (and learned) appropriately. As she puts it, ‘getting a particular social form right matters to those involved’. Anderson might further be taken as implying that there is sometimes an aesthetic quality to such value judgements: that particular ways of interacting are not merely considered correct but in some sense beautiful, or ugly. We are reminded of Overing and Passes’ (2000, xii) insight that ‘there is an aesthetics to Amazonian ways of action, and styles of everyday relating that are morally – and therefore aesthetically – not only proper but beautiful and pleasing’. Sociality does seem susceptible to judgements of value on aesthetic grounds, although questions of taste seem far less individual and subjective in this context than we are probably used to assuming.

While particular forms of sociality may be compared and valued with respect to one another, there is also a more general sense in which sociality is valued as a foundational dimension of the human condition: sociality not as a particular social form, but a state of existence in a general relational matrix. As we have seen, the concept of sociality is a useful corrective to more static and bounded alternatives such as ‘society’ or ‘culture’ – and yet it arguably retains the foundation of these concepts in notions such as unity, cooperation, and integration. This is also, as I have noted, a role played by values, which express justifiable notions of what is good or desirable in ways that bring people together. Hence the overlap between the two concepts themselves, and the prevailing sense of sociality as highly valuable in itself. That said, Long and Moore (2013, 7) do make the point that (despite the propensities of certain philosophers) sociality should not be equated with ‘group living’ or a ‘we-mode’ and is not necessarily all about commitment and connection. Social ties, they point out, may be dense with aggression and danger, and ‘even those modalities of engaging with others that cultivate forms of detachment, or the simulation of non-relations, can be valuably understood as a particular ethical engagement with the very relations that they suppress’ (Long and Moore 2013, 7). Moreover, as Long puts it in his own analysis of an online gaming community, ‘visions of the good life need not be based on communitarianism and the erasure of difference and discord’ (Long 2013, 113).

In a similar vein, a number of scholars have in recent years drawn attention to the value people may place on disengagement from others: Candea et al. (2015, 1), for instance, have argued that while ‘[e]ngagement has ... become a definitive and unquestionable social good ... in a wide range of settings detachment is still socially, ethically and politically valued’. Along such lines, Kavedžija (2019) has recently shown how contemporary Japanese artists value processes of withdrawal and isolation as an essential component of their creative process, which demands a careful balance between valued forms of sociality and moments of inner withdrawal. Social engagement is seen as important and beneficial and is clearly highly valued; at the same time, inspiration often came when people were alone, and thus artists were very conscious of the need to create and protect a space for artistic work which shielded them from the pressures and distractions of everyday life.

Many of the papers gathered here similarly examine the value, but also the limits, of everyday sociality (or at least its figuring as a more generic ‘relationality’), and the value many people place on withdrawal and independence. Remme, for instance, is clear that ‘too much sociality’ is undesirable for Ifugao villagers in the Philippines, who work hard to maintain distance where it is required. Lounela similarly writes of the value of disconnection from others among the Dayak of Borneo and how that allows for self-

determination, despite the otherwise high value placed once again on relationality. Sociality is also regarded with ambivalence when it comes to be seen as instrumental, or as motivated by economic considerations, which is increasingly the case with the rise of the *handel* groups; such ambivalence is one reason why people have begun to shy away from assuming leadership roles. Herrmans, meanwhile, is quite explicit that while ‘relationality’ has high intrinsic value for the Luangans of Indonesian Borneo, as the focus of collective ritual and other activities, sociality also has a dark side and can also be perilous; mistrust always lurks right beneath the surface. Here, too, people are concerned – and especially when it comes to spirits – to generate closeness and reciprocity, but only up to a point, and in ways that allow for maintaining difference and distance. In short, there is a particular way that sociality ‘should’ be represented discursively – its ideological dimension, if you will – which does not necessarily correspond the way it unfolds on the ground. There is perhaps a useful distinction to be made here, between the sociality that people actually enact, with its tendencies towards disengagement and mistrust, and the rosier ideals of harmonious sociality that tend to figure as a consciously articulated values. Any disjunctions between these might prove particularly fertile sites for further investigation. This leads to another question that few have taken up explicitly but which I find particularly pertinent, concerning the extent to which values are part of an ideological matrix that legitimises domination or inequality even as it hides them from view. The value of hereditary rank among Makassar speakers in Indonesia, as described by Gibson in this volume, and the corporate and hierarchical form of sociality it entails, might be a case in point.

Question 3. What Is the Relationship Between Values?

The third and final question I wish to pose here concerns the relationship between those values constitutive of sociality: when and how, if at all, do these values conflict or contradict one another, rather than complementing or even reinforcing one other, and how, in such circumstances, do people choose between them? Consider for a moment the contribution by Gibson in this volume, who argues for the coexistence of distinct ‘symbolic complexes’, zones of action exemplified and materially instantiated in the house, the mosque, and the school, and which correspond quite closely, I think, to what Weber referred to as distinct value spheres. On the one hand, Gibson proposes that these symbolic complexes are ‘incommensurable’ and that the values associated with each are effectively in competition, such that individual actors are compelled to choose between them. On the other hand, he observes that the symbolic capital accumulated in one sphere can be converted into another: people often try to use their religious knowledge or their wealth, for instance, to improve their social rank. In the final analysis, it is unclear to me whether, or in what terms, the average individual experiences genuine conflict. Might it instead be an artefact of the analysis?

The question recalls the classic debate in moral and political philosophy between advocates of value pluralism on the one hand and value monism on the other. While the former claim that the values of a particular society are ultimately irreconcilable with one another and destined to conflict, the latter claim they are ultimately integrated in some way, either because they are reducible to some ultimate value such as happiness, or because the realisation of each value ultimately supports the realisation of all others.

As Robbins (2013) has noted, anthropologists have naturally gravitated towards value pluralism, the position first made famous by Isaiah Berlin: Lambek (2008), for instance, has argued that ethical values, unlike economic values, tend to be incommensurable, and thus require the exercise of judgement. To be sure, it is not difficult to find instances where values appear to conflict (liberty and equality being the classic example in the Western tradition), or where people feel torn between two courses of action, each of which seems to align with something they hold dear. Robbins himself proposes an empirical approach to the question: some societies may be pluralist and others monist when it comes to values, and it is up to us as analysts to figure out which is which.

This is a good approach for an anthropologist, even if philosophically evasive. And yet I do think it worth highlighting the power of Dworkin's (2011) argument for value monism, and its relevance for anthropologists. Unlike some monists, he does not posit some higher value of utility from which the value of other aims is derived. Instead he claims that genuine values do not conflict, but are instead mutually supportive: there is, in short, a fundamental unity to value. To be sure, people often experience what they take to be a conflict between competing values; but such conflict is more apparent than real, and based on a misinterpretation of one or more of the values involved. A better interpretation – which is what we should be striving for – will reveal how the values may be reconciled, and thus, ultimately, the correct course of action. For example, in the Western liberal tradition, freedom and equality are often taken to conflict irreconcilably; the most we can hope for is some kind of acceptable compromise between them. Dworkin's position, however, is that a more precise interpretation of these values can reveal their interdependence. He draws an important distinction here between values and desiderata, or that which society finds desirable; only values have 'judgemental force' and entail that a person who fails to respect a value wrongs someone. The question might then be expressed as follows: are our interlocutors, when choosing one course of action over another where an ostensible conflict of values is involved, actually committing a wrong against someone? Do they feel remorse? If not, it may well be the case that a better interpretation of those values will reveal how they in fact reinforce one another.

It is striking how many of the papers here point to a remarkably similar tension between two distinct values, construed as lying at the heart of the particular forms of sociality described: values variously glossed as autonomy and relationality (Herrmans); autonomy and tradition (Remme); autonomy and solidarity (Lounela); or 'being social' and 'being oneself' (Anderson). The authors mostly take for granted that these values stand in tension, and that this lends sociality its dynamic and unstable quality. While I do not necessarily disagree with such an analysis, a strong case could be made that these values are more compatible with one another than they seem. This is effectively the conclusion arrived at by Anderson, who writes: 'Rather than seeing this as antithetical to "being social", as liberal ideology might have it, I regard "being oneself" as a performative genre on par with and interwoven in the enactment of "being social"'. If we turn to other places characterised by a similar kind of tension between autonomy and relatedness, such as native Amazonia, we indeed see that what counts as personal autonomy for local people not only emerges out of intense and intimate forms of sociality, which is so often oriented towards the production of persons; but that sociality itself is valued only insofar as participants are autonomous (e.g. Walker 2012, 1–5). What

appears to us as a tension or conflict between values thus ultimately demands a more careful interpretation, until their mutually supportive qualities become clear.

Consider, for instance, the adoption of ‘new’ values of individualism and corporate sociality introduced by the new canal groups in Kalimantan – the case discussed by Lounela – which on the face of it conflict with the values of traditional sociality. On further examination, these actually turned out to resonate quite closely with earlier emphases on autonomy and the family. In a similar vein, the new ‘business rituals’ practiced in Luangan appeared at first glance to reflect ‘shifting and conflicting value orientations’, and yet upon closer scrutiny, suggests Herrmans, they served ‘to maintain precisely some of those values that they are taken to contradict’, such as an extended field of relationality. Consider now, finally, the longstanding conflict between José and Wigan, the two Ifugao villagers described by Remme: at the heart of their disagreement was the fact that each held to a different interpretation of the value of tradition. Wigan saw his attempt to purchase land as legitimately traditional, while José did not; and thus he saw autonomy and tradition as eminently reconcilable. What all this suggests, I think, in the first instance, is that we cannot simply assume that ostensibly conflicting values do really conflict, and are ultimately incommensurable, in the absence of evidence that people consistently experience them as such – which is to say, that a wrong has been done when they choose one over the other. Our hermeneutical task, in such cases, should be to offer an interpretation of those values that strives at consistency or compatibility. Such a conclusion points further at the difficulty, if not impossibility, of depicting any given society as straightforwardly monist or pluralist, simply because of how values are always open to if not demanding (re-)interpretation, by our interlocutors themselves as much as by ourselves as analysts. In the final analysis, any claim that values exist in tension must contend with the clearly observable tendency that people have to minimise internal discrepancies and conflicts: their inclination, as it were, to unify value.

Conclusion

The importance, but also ambivalence, of sociality comes through strongly in this volume. People clearly pursue and value their relationships with others, perhaps above all else. And yet the importance placed on relating with others seems often to stand in a kind of tension with the value of autonomy, of being one’s own person. What is more, the relations with others that are valued are not always purely connective or integrative; many relations must be carefully monitored for excessive closeness. Focusing on values reveals very clearly this essential aspect of sociality, as demanding attention to the processes through which separation and connection are managed and negotiated. It also helps to reveal how periodic disagreement and disengagement from others may be formative, moulding people into recognisable (and valued) kinds of subjects.

Are values really important in motivating people to act? The papers collected here suggest only a very tentative yes. The role of values really becomes clear only in those cases where people are induced, for one reason or another, to consider how particular acts can be justified in the face of critique. This highlights a potential problem with any approach, including Weber’s, which construes values as prior to action or as motivating it from without, rather than as coming into being through action or as a post-hoc rationalisation of it. Such a view, we might suggest, corresponds to a particular view of

sociality as essentially a matter of cooperation: a process that establishes beneficial forms of coordination between fully formed individuals, who for reasons of perceived mutual benefit decide to enter into relationship. What is lacking here is the generative dimension of sociality, properly construed: the way it shapes persons, just as social action shapes values and brings them into being, above all through processes of justification and critique – or what Sillander (2021) in the Introduction refers to as authorisation. This further brings us to the observation that values, like sociality, have a strong ideological character: once they enter into discourse, or become objects of reflection and deliberation, they increasingly serve to conceal and legitimise what is really going on, and who benefits. At the very least, we should ask why certain values and forms of sociality become dominant in particular times and places. As Graeber (2013, 228) writes, after all,

this is what politics is always ultimately about: not just to accumulate value, but to define what value is, and how different values ... dominate, encompass, or otherwise relate to one another; and thus at the same time, between those imaginary arenas in which they are realized.

Simul et singulis, ‘Be together while remaining yourself’, runs the motto of the prestigious *Comédie Française* theatre troupe whose evanescent sociality, according to Heintz (2018), is similarly characterised by unevenly shared commitments to values that can appear to pull people in opposing directions. This might just be a wonderfully apt motto for many of the peoples described in this volume, whatever their specific differences in terms of what they hold dear and the kinds of life they aspire to. It neatly encapsulates the essence of a particular form of sociality that is especially highly valued in diverse settings throughout the world, constituted through a kind of tension or balancing act between two independent values which nevertheless might, if we look closely – which is to say, dedicate ourselves to the task of interpretation – reinforce one another after all.

Note

1. Affective action (undertaken as a means of satisfying the immediate demands of an emotional state such as passion or anger) and traditional action (arising more from ingrained habit or routine than from any conscious deliberation) were both seen as less reflective and rational (see Weber 1978, 24–26).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [grant number 715725].

References

- Anderson, Sally. 2021. “Fashioning a Mind of One’s Own in the Good Company of Others.” *Anthropological Forum* 31 (1).

- Baumard, N., and D. Sperber. 2013. "A Mutualistic Approach to Morality." *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 36 (1): 59–122.
- Candea, Matei, Joanna Cook, Catherine Trundle, and Thomas Yarrow. 2015. "Introduction: Reconsidering Detachment." In *Detachment: Essays on the Limits of Relational Thinking*, edited by M. Candea, J. Cook, C. Trundle, and T. Yarrow, 1–31. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Curry, Oliver Scott, Daniel Austin Mullins, and Harvey Whitehouse. 2019. "Is It Good to Cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 Societies." *Current Anthropology* 60 (1): 47–69.
- Das, Veena. 2012. "Ordinary Ethics." In *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin, 133–149. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2011. *Justice for Hedgehogs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gellner, David, Oliver Scott Curry, Joanna Cook, Mark Alfano, and Soumhya Venkatesan. 2020. "Morality is Fundamentally an Evolved Solution to Problems of Social Co-operation." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26 (2): 415–427.
- Gibson, Thomas. 2021. "Sociality, Value, and Symbolic Complexes among the Makassar of Indonesia." *Anthropological Forum* 31 (1).
- Graeber, David. 2013. "It Is Value That Brings Universes into Being." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (2): 219–243.
- Heintz, Monica. 2018. "Sociality as Professional Ethics: Collaborative Projects in the French Independent Theatre Milieu." Paper presented at the Association of Social Anthropology 2018 Conference, Oxford, UK.
- Henrich, N., and J. Henrich. 2007. *Why Humans Cooperate: A Cultural and Evolutionary Explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herrmans, Isabell. 2021. "Ritual Sociality and the Limits of Shamanic Efficacy Among the Luangans of Indonesian Borneo." *Anthropological Forum* 31 (1).
- Ingold, Tim. 1997. "Life Beyond the Edge of Nature? Or, the Mirage of Society." In *The Mark of the Social: Discovery or Invention?*, edited by J. D. Greenwood, 231–252. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kavedžija, Iza. 2019. "I Move My Hand and Then I See It: Sensing and Knowing with Young Artists in Japan." *Asian Anthropology* 18 (3): 222–237.
- Laidlaw, James. 2014. *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambek, Michael. 2008. "Value and Virtue." *Anthropological Theory* 8 (2): 133–157.
- Lambek, Michael, ed. 2010. *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Long, Nicholas. 2013. "Utopian Sociality. Online." In *Sociality: New Directions*, edited by N. Long and H. Moore, 101–116. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Long, Nicholas J., and Henrietta L. Moore. 2013. "Introduction: Sociality's New Directions." In *Sociality: New Directions*, edited by N. Long and H. Moore, 1–24. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Lounela, Anu. 2021. "Shifting Valuations of Sociality and the Riverine Environment in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia." *Anthropological Forum* 31 (1).
- Overing, Joanna, and Alan Passes. 2000. "Introduction: Conviviality and the Opening Up of Amazonian Anthropology." In *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*, edited by J. Overing and A. Passes, 1–30. London and New York: Routledge.
- Remme, Jon H. Z. 2021. "The Instability of Values: Tradition, Autonomy and the Dynamics of Sociality in the Philippine Highlands." *Anthropological Forum* 31 (1).
- Robbins, Joel. 2013. "Monism, Pluralism, and the Structure of Value Relations: A Dumontian Contribution to the Contemporary Study of Value." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (1): 99–115.
- Robbins, Joel. 2018. "Where in the World are Values? Exemplarity, Morality, and Social Process." In *Recovering the Human Subject: Freedom, Creativity and Decision*, edited by James Laidlaw, Barbara Bodenbord, and Martin Holbraad, 174–192. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Sillander, Kenneth. 2021. "Introduction: Qualifying Sociality Through Values." *Anthropological Forum* 31 (1).
- Stafford, Charles, Ellen Judd, and Eona Bell. 2018. *Cooperation in Chinese Communities: Morality and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1990. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tomasello, Michael, and Amrisha Vaish. 2013. "Origins of Human Cooperation and Morality." *Annual Review of Psychology* 64 (1): 231–255.
- Walker, Harry. 2012. *Under a Watchful Eye: Self, Power, and Intimacy in Amazonia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2011. "How Far Away Can We Move from Durkheim? Reflections on the New Anthropology of Morality." *Anthropology of this Century* (2).
- Zigon, Jarrett. 2007. "Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand: A Theoretical Framework for an Anthropology of Moralities." *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): 131–150.