

Elements for the Theory of Value in Ancient Philosophy

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Abstract

Although axiology is a new philosophical discipline (the second half of the 19th century), we can talk about both a prehistory and a protohistory of axiology. The most important aspect of axiology belongs to its prehistory. Examining the doctrines of ancient philosophers one can conclude that, although no Greek thinker had the distinct conscience of a specific realm of values, yet each generation had intuitions proper to the axiological perspective. Their intuitions regarded the human act of founding the world of values (the Sophists), or the argumentation in favour of the general character of values (Plato and Aristotle) or a hierarchy of values as a model of human education and formation.

Keywords: *Value, Hierarchy of Values, Axiology, Prehistory, Protohistory, Gorgias, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Epicurus.*

For a Protohistory of Axiology

It is well-established in the field of Philosophy that Axiology has entered late the area of human reflection: in the second half of the nineteenth century. Why the human being became aware of the intrinsic existence of value only at that point may be difficult to explain, but it is certainly not futile. Leaving this query aside for now, it is worth mentioning that, although Axiology is a new branch of Philosophy, it has existed since forever, in the form of prehistory and protohistory. Its most important aspects belong to its prehistory; however, a few explanations are required for the proper understanding of this fact.

Prehistory is an ordinary term, but one concealing the prejudice that mankind moves beyond its anthropogenesis phase with the invention of writing. The dilation of memory with its narcotic effects on time – occurring with the invention of writing – is not the sign for the end of prehistory, an aspect actually emphasised by Plato as embarrassing and dishonourable for the spirit (*Phaedrus*, 274 – 276).

Much more significant events should be regarded as determining criteria for this end. The tool-making, language, symbolisation, ludic, valorisation, etc. represent, in the contemporary thinkers' view, not only distinctive elements from the animal world, but also crucial indices in the history of mankind. Thus, reconsidered, prehistory may be the time interval in which takes place the qualitative leap from the incidental production and usage of tools to the generalisation of this way of living, or from the communication of various emotions or sensations through inarticulate sounds to the emergence of utterances which settle out ideas about emotions and sensations, etc. Questions such as how to advance towards creative life or how verbal communication emerges must be accompanied – as for a *prehistory of axiology* – by wonderment with regard to the origin of values in the existence of humanoids. A survey daring enough to bring forth a few data from the shadows of prehistory should resort to instruments of sociology, psychology, linguistics, ethology, as well as of their sub-branches.¹ Such an endeavour is not one of the aims of the present undertaking; suffice it to mention it in order to understand what one ought to pursue in the *protohistory of axiology*.

In this case, too, the common meaning of the term protohistory, as an interval between prehistory and history, should be reinterpreted from the perspective of our topic of interest: axiology. In the classical sense, history begins with Herodotus, as he is “the first” to put forward the deeds of men in writing, *so that neither what has come to be from man in time might become faded*. It is not a proper history of mankind, but rather the awareness with regard to the necessity of recording some facts (“great and wondrous deeds, those shown forth by Greeks and those by barbarians”). It is not that history begins with them, but from their conscious recording begins the historical conscience of the European humanity. In the classical sense, the “history” that begins with Herodotus is the science of history. Likewise, Axiology, which stems from the nineteenth century philosophers – Lotze, Ehrenfels, Meinong, Rickert, Scheler, etc. – is the science of values. These authors are the first to record the self-contained domain of values and elaborate treatises on a particular world: the world of values. This is the reason why one can speak about a history of axiology only by taking them as starting point, whilst the past centuries may only be recovered as protohistorical. In other words, for a long interval of time, values were perceived unconsciously, not reflected from the perspective of values categories, without acknowledging the existence of the genre or, even more primitively, by considering value types often

¹ About the origin of *Homo Aestimans*, the biblical story of paradise lost provides suggestions capable to trigger multiple interpretations within the domain of prehistory of axiology.

particular and peripheral. The aim of this demarche is to account for the crucial moments preceding the birth of Axiology. Resorting to a diachronic approach, we shall further highlight the axiological insights of the ancient thinking.

The Matter of Value in Antiquity

The Presocratics show, apparently, no preoccupation with the issue of values. Their concern with reshaping the image of the genesis of all that there is by identifying the beginning (*arche*) somewhere else than the traditional mentality placed it has been interpreted as a disinterested and speculative production of an effort aiming at an objective and sensible research on nature. Nevertheless, in its substratum, this action of turning the explanation from mythological irrational to theoretical rational is an axiological gesture. And if nature was the topic of interest for the brightest of the minds, it does not mean that the issue of value is non-existent: its presence is related with each and every answer to the question of the world principle; each naturalist philosopher – besides the secondary ambition to earn the universal adherence to his views – asserted, at the same time, the universal value of his own truth. The multitude of explanatory paradigms actually underlines the way of interpreting the origin of the universe from a free and personal valorisation. Considering, it is wrong to place the first debates on values with the Sophists. The Naturalists also spoke about values: about the value of their scientific explanations.

The role of the Sophists has been recorded as remarkable and pioneering, as their subjectivist perspective met the subjectivist nature of value. Further, it is worth mentioning that the Sophists bring forth a radical change in the approach to metaphysical issues: from the simple, non-critical reflection of the origin of cosmos, they make the transition towards the critical reflection of the *human deed* oriented towards surveying the diversity of phenomena. The individual nature of the human deeds led them to the assertion that no value can acquire universal nature or a foundation that would justify its normative nature.

Protagoras, most famous for his assertion that “man is the measure of all things” and, consequently, “individual things are for me such as they appear to me, and for you in turn such as they appear to you” (Plato, *Cratylus*, 385, e), radically expresses the relativity and subjectivity of all human deeds. Commenting upon this idea, Aristotle points out that it leads to the assertion that everything that appears to someone actually exists: “But if this is so, it follows that the same thing is and is not, and is bad and good, and that all the other implications of opposite statements are true; because often a given thing seems beautiful to one set of people and ugly

to another, and that which seems to each individual is the measure”.² Man is the criterion of the reality from the perspective of appearance. And in order to exclude any possibility of human reasoning with regard to appearance, Protagoras claims that they stem from two different sources: on the one hand, from the perpetual change of things, and on the other hand, from the changes that occur in the human body. In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (I, 216-219), Sextus Empiricus accounts for the impossibility of establishing the truth as scientific value:

So this philosopher claims that matter is in flux and that as it flows additions are continuously made, replacing the effluvia; and that the senses are restructured and altered depending on the age and the other structural features of our bodies. [...] But people apprehend different things at different times depending on the different conditions they are in. For the person who is in a natural condition apprehends those features of matter that can appear to people who are in a natural condition, while those who are in an unnatural condition apprehend what can appear to people in an unnatural condition. And the same account applies in relation to age and as regards being asleep or awake and for each type of condition. For him, therefore, man becomes the criterion of existence, since whatever appears to somebody exists, and what does not appear to anybody does not exist.³

We may note that the Sophists ground the validity of their assertions on Heraclitean reasoning so that from any intersection of the flux which disentangles the inconsistency of things with the constant variation of human deeds, in relation to senses, age, illness, the condition of being awake or asleep, might only result a *grounding* of appearances.

Protagoras' perseverance in denying the general character of values was eventually fatal to him. According to certain information, his ideas in *On Gods* triggered the Athenians' rage and his sentence to death. His works were burnt in the public square and their author, although he eloped, could not escape the divine wrath: he shipwrecked and died at sea. Indeed, his ideas are scandalous from the perspective of the collective mindset, offensive for the way of reasoning of the common citizen who, we must believe, projected his numerous needs for security and prosperity onto gods. “As far as the gods are concerned” – Protagoras claimed – “I have no means to know whether they truly exist or they do not exist; for many

² Aristotel, *Metafizica (Metaphysics)* (Bucharest, IRI, 1996), 1062, b.

³ *Filosofia greacă până la Platon (Greek philosophy until Plato)*, vol. II, Part. 2 (Bucharest, 1984), 290.

are the reasons that prevent knowledge; both the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life.”⁴

There is no realm of values that may evade the sceptical nihilism of the Sophists. Euripides notes rhetorically, with the help of a character, the new irritating trend against reason: “What is evil if the perpetrator does not see it as evil?” It is problematic that moral grounding is denied to the human behaviour itself. If men are still righteous, it is the result of weakness, inability, or resignations that give birth to conventions which account for human degradation. Moral human behaviour is the symptom of his nature degenerescence. This thesis, re-acted passionately in modern times by Nietzsche, is worth considering for the reconsideration of human nature as the Sophists inferred it, reconsideration that may underline not only the originality and perennity of the challenges of this current, as retrieved from the detractors’ texts, but also the rare occurrence in the field of human reflection of the topic of the importance – in axiological sense – of human subjectivity and individuality. The Sophists only seem to acknowledge the inexistence of a hierarchy of values: after all, how can one layer individual opinions on reality, personal beliefs or the irreducible diversity of behaviours? This impossibility generates an axiological void on whose background one should see the rise of a unique value: human individuality. This notion will reappear only in the twentieth century Existentialism.

Plato, a ruthless author with Socrates’ collocutors, as he authorizes them only to giving replies which validate the answers, rarely manifests the urge to substantially reproduce the opposing point of view. However, in *Gorgias* (483, b) he seems to present the Sophists’ view:

For the suffering of injustice is not the part of a man, but of a slave, who indeed had better die than live; since when he is wronged and trampled upon, he is unable to help himself, or any other about whom he cares. The reason, as I conceive, is that the makers of laws are the majority who are weak; and they make laws and distribute praises and censures with a view to themselves and to their own interests; and they terrify the stronger sort of men, and those who are able to get the better of them, in order that they may not get the better of them; and they say, that dishonesty is shameful and unjust; meaning, by the word injustice, the desire of a man to have more than his neighbours; for knowing their own inferiority, I suspect that they are too glad of equality. And therefore the endeavour to have more than the many, is conventionally said to be shameful and unjust, and is called injustice, whereas nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more

⁴ Diogene Laertios, *Despre viețile și doctrinele filosofilor (On the lives and doctrines of philosophers)* (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 299.

powerful than the weaker; and in many ways she shows, among men as well as among animals, and indeed among whole cities and races, that justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior.

Justice is the expression of the relation of forces. If the right is naturally grounded in the force of each human individual, within the social order, on the contrary, the many, due to their weakness, conventionally establish laws in which the right is prohibitive: not to be above the others, not to seek possessing more than the others, so as the Socratic virtue of rather suffering from injustice than causing it appears as a supreme form of human nature degradation. The good, the justice in the order of nature are values that escape universalization, being the fruit of the power of each individual. If there is, however, an attempt to validate these values, it is artificial, as it is the fruit of the weak meant to frighten and curse the powerful. This is the very reason why Nietzsche will later denounce such values as manifestations of human weakness, of the decadence of spirit. One can sense in Nietzsche something from the spiritual strength of the Sophists which could not pass the censorship of time, probably because of the polemicists' too great a concern to reasonably justify the elevated and patterning order of the human values.

With Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the first moment of the birth of the European intellectual (in the modern sense of the term) is attested. They are creators of utopias in whose core a new type of humanity is projected, one of a spiritual elevation inaccessible to an ordinary existence. What is interesting is that the values which define the spiritual elevation of this new type of humanity are, nonetheless, conjugated with the aspirations of the many: those of reducing suffering and unjustified oppression. The individualist perspective of the Sophists was in favour of the actions in which the end – the manifestation of power – cannot be fenced by anything, in which everything is permitted. Hence their admiration for slave and usurper Archelaos, who ascends to the throne of Macedonia through horrible crimes, worthy of the works of Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky.

Plato, overwhelmingly impressed by Socrates' efforts to give a foundation to human aspirations, takes up his demarche to such an extent that one cannot make the difference between what is Socratic and what is Platonic. When it comes to such a school of wisdom, delimitations do not matter. In the realm of axiological ideas, the school's direction is clearly that of defining the most important

categories of values. Plato's *Dialogues* have been subtitled so as to help our immediate understanding with regard to the values approached: on duty, courage, lie, piety, beauty, justice, friendship, virtue, etc.

Maieutics, the determinative philosophical exercise, elevates our understanding of these values from particular judgements to judgements that comprise the general specificities of, say, beauty or friendship. The maieutic exercise is all the more illuminating with respect to the understanding of the nature of the respective values when the partners abide by the rules of the game (rules proper to any human dialogue) – to accept the other's opinion and, in situations when evidence requires consensus, to firmly accept the truth thus established. Contemporary Axiology teaches us that the general character of values is grounded in people's coincidence with regard to fundamental desiderative deeds. This is the reason why Plato's *Dialogues* are models of arguments in which the characters become paradigmatic incarnations of the way in which mankind as a whole ends up agreeing to adhere to a valorisation type. In this way, Plato points to our access towards a hierarchy of values.

In *Hippias Maior*, in the identification of beauty, the debate advances gradually: "beauty as individual expression, as a general matter, as conformity or adequacy to the matter, as human appropriateness, as self-appropriateness, as appropriateness useful in itself and as a selfless delight."⁵

To the first definition of the Sophist, Socrates agrees that beauty is a beautiful girl, without making any mistake from the desiderative point of view. This agreement is rather didactic: he wants to teach the Sophist that his question was not referring to a beautiful thing, but to beauty in general. And then, as Hippias still did not get the meaning of the question, the comparisons with the beautiful monkey, the beautiful stallions, and the beauty of the divine women make him understand that beauty is relative from the individual perspective and that Socrates was in fact seeking for the absolute beauty. Like gold, for instance, replies Hippias, illuminated. Indeed, gold, this general material, is coveted by everybody, at all times. We may as well settle for this. But Socrates is hard to please: how come Phidias did not know that gold was beauty and used ivory for the statue of Athena? Ivory also represents beauty. Then, why didn't he use ivory for the eyes of the goddess, but a certain gem? This way, using the example with the fig wood spoon, which is more adequate for using in a boiling pot than a golden spoon, Socrates gives birth to a new definition of beauty: matching,

⁵ Constantin Noica, "Interpretare la *Hippias Maior*" (Interpretation on *Hippias Maior*), in Platon, *Opere (Works)*, vol. II (Bucharest, 1976).

harmony of things and, in the human order, to be rich, healthy, esteemed by your fellow citizens, to live as long as possible, to bury your parents in accordance with traditions and to be, in turn, buried by your sons. Socrates' discontents do not come to an end here. Heracles is the son of Zeus. How impious is then this definition! We will put an end at this point, as the dialogue as a whole is rather interesting for Aesthetics. Nonetheless, we must note Socrates' discontent and his closing remark: "how difficult are the beautiful". His discontent reflects the difficulty of the sensible deed to comprise the irrational nature of values; it also reflects the inadequate nature of our judgements on values, whose core can be but accessed by desire. The argument between Hippias and Socrates must be construed as a dialogue between a man who defines beauty through desiderative deeds and another one who tries to encompass beauty by reasoning. The difference is that Hippias will never be aware of and interested in a scale of values, whilst a Socratic strives after it.

Focalised in the form of consensus with regard to its original meaning, the world of values will be gradually integrated by Plato in the sphere of those general elements of reality with a shaping impact in the realm of foundation. We are in the most confounding area of ancient philosophy, as behind these models lie concepts, as abstractions of the human mind knowledgeable of things (Aristotle) and values, as genetic desiderative expressions, the fruits of a long internalisation of the historical human experience. Concepts are explanatory in the order of physical determinism, whilst values are normative in the order of human formation. We can meet Platonism half way, by identifying the world of ideas in Mendeleev's periodic table or in the genetic information, in the world of archetypes or in the stylistic matrix. Platonism consecrates its immunity in such representations. But, a distinction that was not clear in antiquity is in order: between the physical universe with its predetermined order, and a spiritual, teleological universe, between a world of nature and a world of culture. Socrates in *Phaidon* was aware that not his bones, tendons or muscles had sent him to prison to drink the hemlock, but the idea of good that he had pursued towards the perfect self-shaping. However, Plato does not make the distinction between shaping Values in the order of spirit – by choices made by individuals (the *choices* themselves are the result of predetermination, of the time the soul has for reining itself in the demiurgical world of ideas), because the Ancients were short-sighted when it came to the importance of the value of human freedom – and Forms, as constitutive principles of the individual reality, of the physical order. To him, the world of spirit and that

of nature are subjected to a single cause, that of supra-sensible reality, associated with the Idea of Good.

Plato hereby accomplishes a lot in the direction of overcoming the Sophist nihilism. The sensible reality is flowing, but in doing so, it aims to a certain end. This end is the essence. It is the idea that determines teleologically the foundation of the thing. Human reason can scientifically establish the truth about reality by acknowledging this convergent end. Inasmuch as the validity of our knowledge depends on the perpetual existence of some absolute models accessible to the effort of sensible knowledge, our individual behaviour and our subjective experience acquire the highest expression due to the rational elevation towards the Idea of Good or Beauty.

The acknowledgement of the values through sensible deeds, and not through the desiderative ones, may be explained with the help of their ontological status. As values cannot be characterised according to this status, the platonic system abounds in such aporias, as those which concern the possibility of teaching virtue or the necessity of condemning art. If in *Menon* the absolute premise is that virtue cannot be taught, this is more than the consequence of the fact that Pericles is unable to educate his sons: it is the consequence of a vague inference that this value evades the human reason. Plato chooses the theoretical path: the virtue consists in acknowledging the good. There are no teachers for such knowledge, but this does not mean that there cannot be in the future, he thought, keeping Socrates in mind. On the other hand, art should be condemned because, since it is a copy of the copies of ideas (an imitation in the second degree), it moves farther and farther from the true reality, reminding less and less of the true values. And, more often than not, the art triggers immoral passions and thus becomes dangerous for the citizens' virtues.

Aiming at knowing a perpetual and unchangeable ideal, the human beings reach perfection by releasing themselves from the actual world. Truth, Good, Beauty and Justice belong to this world only inasmuch as they are able to arouse the spirit from the sleep of the matter and to redeem it to an authentic reality. In *The Banquet*, there is a hierarchy of values which underlines the ascension of the soul: individual beauty arouses the Idea of Beauty, and, by loving a person one reaches the righteous love for people (*Philanthropy*) and thus acquires a first science. Ascending towards the wholeness of knowledge, one reaches love for wisdom. This ascension towards the Good, highlighted by Beauty, Justice and Truth, is redemptive. Other than that, Plato shows nothing but disdain for the

terrestrial values. Whatever they may be – money, earthly goods, political power, and honour – they can but bedraggle the soul into the glory of lifelessness.

Aristotle, a realist spirit, does not identify the foundations of the various categories of values in a supra-sensible reality, although we may ultimately note an understanding resembling that of his master in what the teleological determination of the individual relations is concerned. A philosopher and a scientist, he delineates the theoretical from the sphere of practical actions. Truth, good and justice are not grounded in a world of immutable essences, but in various types of deeds done by people on this world. Anti-platonic, Aristotle also refutes the Sophists.

Humanity can found generally-valid truths, as the act of knowledge does not presuppose only sensorial perceptions, but also rational ones. The truth as scientific value is founded at the level of judgement: to assert that what it is actually is not or that what it is not actually is constitutes a false proposition; on the contrary, a true proposition is that by which one asserts that what it is, is and what it is not, is not. The phrase “truth - correspondence” resulted from the Aristotelian definition of truth and falsehood may be misleading in what concerns the dependency of the scientific truth value on an external continuity. The value of the scientific truth depends to the same extent on the logical principles which, as Aristotle rightfully observes, can be only proven by reduction to absurdity. Never will people agree that one thing is and is not at the same time. The truth is not only the correspondence of what is asserted in this proposition with what it actually exists in reality, but also the virtual consensus of the whole mankind with regard to the said correspondence, a consensus that is subject to the normative control of the logic principles.

The justification for the good, justice and economic assets are identified by Aristotle through the communitary nature of the human being. The need to define the man as *zoon politikon* stems from the foundation of values on a demonstrative support, and not on a hypothetical one, as in the case of Platonism. Naturally, by their articulate language, the human beings manifest a predisposition towards uttering the just and unjust, the right and wrong, what is useful or detrimental to them, whilst the other beings can only express pleasure or pain through onomatopoeia. Without virtue, the human being encounters either the degeneration down to animals’ level, which will result in isolation from the social body, or the spiritual elevation whose consequence lies in the overcoming of the natural

condition, and the sanctity acquired in this way determines the ascetic escapement from the social values sphere. Between the two extremes, delimited up to the present day by gaol and monastery, there is enough room for *Homo Aestimans*' public exercises, which Aristotle regarded as actions of the will meant to safeguard the *via media*.

The philosophical schools at the end of Antiquity have more limited ontological and gnoseological concerns, focus being now laid on soul redemption. What is more important to the soul? The different answers to this question will further define a few philosophical trends of those times: the pleasures of life (the Epicureans), the severe completion of duty (the Stoics), or the abstention to assert something too precise in relation to truth (the Sceptics).

The Stoics distinguish between things in our power and things that are not in our power. The events, everything that happens to us, the goods, fame, and leadership do not depend on us and it would be insane to connect them to our power. Representations and judgements we make about things, impulses, desires and aversion depend on us. Axiologically speaking, the distinction is remarkable: it cautions against a confusion that may derogate the human dignity. If we need to set ourselves free from all the things that are not in our power, the fact is evident from the very nature of these things.

Less remarkable is another Stoic assessment that has triggered serious accusations of insensitivity. In axiological terms, they caution us that when we head towards values (those "goods" that are in our power), we should not do it through sentient deeds, in order to avoid derogating the nature of the respective value. Not only would we derogate its nature, but we would also fail to acknowledge the value as a whole, but only its respective affects, by allowing incidents and favourable or unfavourable circumstances to lead us. The detachment from these affects creates the space of human freedom. The wise man soothes all the affects, passions and inner instincts. Free from the domination of inner impulses and insensitive to external influence, the wise man, self-sufficient, "ceases to aspire to anything alien and fears nothing in the world, for no external incident is capable to move him and no passion can torment his sovereign peace of mind."⁶

Let us keep in mind that the purpose of this ascesis is that of guiding the human being towards values in their purity and not in their accompanying of

⁶ Nicolae Balca, *Istoria filozofiei antice (The history of ancient philosophy)* (Bucharest, 1982), 258.

passions, economic calculation, political stakes or other circumstantial interests. This idea is not forwarded directly, but illustrated by the absolute value that the human being should acquire: virtue. In its purity, this value does not accept intermedial stages between it and the vice. A human being is either completely virtuous, in all the circumstances of his life, or irremediably vicious. There is no means. This is what constitutes human grandeur and the heroism of the Stoic ethic.

The Epicurean also try to provide a relieving solution in a universe divested of sacred significance understood as an emptiness in which wandering atoms haphazardly combine and give birth to ephemeral things. In this world devoid of meaning, what men still have to prize? In their worshipping condition, the Gods are indifferent to the world of physical combinations. Justice is just an artifice of the cities, a convention that may prove useful once in a while, but that can never affect one who becomes aware of the world non-sense. There is no greater misery in life than marriage.

In a devalued world, Epicurus asks us to focus on our own body, the transient structure in which the soul – also corporeal – brings forth imbalance meant to multiply the sufferings. The only aim one should have in his life is getting pleasure, thus eliminating the suffering of the body and the torment of the soul.

Our body is anchored in the present. To remove present sufferings involves the satisfaction of our sensorial necessities. The soul torment is harder to quench, as it is tightly knit with past regrets and future desires and plans. To live in the present, to seize the day can be the solution. We have natural and necessary desires, such as the need to eat and to quench our thirst; desires that are natural, but not compulsorily necessary: the desire to eat better; but also desires that are neither natural, nor necessary, such as glory, wealth, power, honours, etc. We must acquire the virtue to find the wise measurement for balancing these desires in order to attain maximum pleasure. Paradoxically, at the end of this calculation, we find only pleasures that are the consequence of abstention and that lead the wise man to *ataraxia*, to inner peace, as reclusion from the public sphere whilst still dwelling at the very centre of this space. We may consider that the Epicureans promoted the refusal of values as converting tool for our straggling valuations in one supreme good: personal happiness.

What is the lesson on value that one can learn by reading the philosophers of Antiquity? The first thing to note is that they have no awareness of a proper realm

of values. However, all generations had intuitions proper to the axiological perspective, no matter whether they concerned the human deed of founding the world of values (the Sophists), or whether they supported and defended the general character of values (Plato and Aristotle) or they promoted a hierarchy of values as a model for human formation and education.

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