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Joseph Raz
Columbia Law School, jr159@columbia.edu

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Value: A Menu of Questions

Joseph Raz
Columbia Law School /
University of Oxford Faculty of Law

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Joseph Raz

For a long time John Finnis and I taught a joint seminar every year. Many students were lured to attend expecting to witness fierce intellectual conflicts between two academics known to adhere to diametrically opposed philosophical traditions. I would like to think that their disappointment at the general absence of the expected clashes was compensated for by an example of productive debate among people with diverse opinions. But that is too self-congratulatory a view. Perhaps closer to the truth is that while we tend to have radically different views on many specific moral and political issues we share a general approach to the understanding of theoretical ethics and practical reason. One way of characterizing the approach is as a value-based account of practical reasons. Finnis was happy to write about values in NLNR, but in much later writing used 'goods' or 'intelligible goods' or 'human goods' instead. As he does not suggest that the difference in terminology resulted from a difference in content I will use both 'value' and 'goods'. I take this opportunity to reflect on some of the issues that the value-based approach raises. This is a preliminary inquiry, ending with unanswered questions. My hope is that there is some point in articulating the questions, and some of their presuppositions.

1. Value and Action for a reason

Fundamental to the value approach to practical reason is the view that some actions, activities or omissions (for brevity's sake I will use 'actions' to refer to all these categories) have some value properties, some good- or bad- making properties, and that those properties constitute reasons for or against the actions. The reasons referred to here are normative reasons, considerations that give a point to the actions for which they are reasons, make them desirable, and so on. There is no non-circular explanation of what normative reasons are. The notion is explained contextually, and most helpfully by contrast with the other concept the word 'reasons' is used to express, namely reasons as the factors that explain what the reasons are reasons for, as when we explain that the reason I lost the 100m race is that I had a

stomach bug. Whenever I refer to (normative) reasons I will be referring to *pro tanto* reasons. As Finnis explains, values provide *pro tanto* reasons (NLNR 62). I will not be concerned here with the converse claim that nothing else provides reasons for action. Actions are not the only bearers of value properties. Moreover, often they have value properties in virtue of their relations with something else which has such properties: they may be constituent elements of more complex phenomena that are good, and therefore good in being component elements of more complex goods, or they may facilitate the production of some other goods, by creating opportunities for their production, creating favourable conditions for their production, or simply causing them. More indirectly they may be good because they have one of these relations to things or events that are good because they themselves bear these relations to other goods. Hence Finnis explains: 'What "gives a reason" is the good that is referred to in spelling out the reason' (NLNR 443).

This last formulation (clarified in the wider context to have the meaning I spell out below) and some others require cautious treatment. For example, Finnis writes that 'to say that such knowledge is a value is simply to say that reference to the pursuit of knowledge makes intelligible (though not necessarily reasonable-all-things-considered) any particular instance of the human activity and commitment involved in such pursuit'. (62) Two caveats are needed for a proper understanding of these two quotations. I believe that both caveats merely bring out Finnis's meaning.

To see the need for these caveats a crucial point about the relations of reasons to values has to be born in mind. In their actions people and other living beings can be attracted to good options without recognising their value. They may, for example, seek warmth, shelter, protection from predators, food and water, both for themselves and for others, because they are, as we might say, "hard wired" to do so. This is evident in the behaviour of living beings that are incapable of rational action, incapable of realising the grounds for their choices. But it is also true, though in a more limited way, of humans. Sometimes they too flinch from fire instinctively, and not only through apprehension of the harm it may cause. They turn their head automatically when hearing a loud or sudden noise, and while there are good reasons of prudence to do so, that is not why people do it. These actions are a genetically determined behaviour pattern.

Their ability to act because they perceive the value of the action is distinctive of rational beings with a fully developed ability to act for reasons (I formulate it this way to allow that some humans and some animals of other species have a more limited capacity to act for reasons). Actions that manifest that capacity do not necessarily have any value at all. But they are actions taken because the agents believed that they have some value. That is, I believe, the

intended meaning of Finnis's observation that actions are made intelligible by being 'involved in such pursuit'.

Needless to say, given that people's **beliefs** in the value of their actions are involved in the exercise of their capacity for rational action the possibility that their action possesses no value is inescapable. It follows from the possibility that those beliefs are false. People act for a reason whenever they act in the belief that their actions have some value, whether these beliefs are true or false, at least so long as their beliefs that their actions have value are intelligible.

Possibly this last qualification is not needed. All that needs saying is that people act for a reason when they act because they believe that the action has some value. Of course there will be cases in which people will **claim** that the reason for their action was this or that, using words we normally use to designate some evaluative property, but where in fact they do not refer to any value property. Their command of the relevant words may be defective, leading them to choose the wrong word. Or their mastery of the concepts (either the concept of value, or that of the specific evaluative property concerned) may be defective and incoherent so that it makes no sense to attribute to them the assertion that would normally be expressed with the words they used. The crucial point is that people may have false beliefs about what is of value.

I assume that the possibility that people may (and sometimes do) have false beliefs about the value of various options needs no argument. But are such beliefs intelligible? Perhaps they are intelligible only when true, for they are made intelligible by it being the case that things are as they represent them to be? That is a mistake. We do understand what people say even when we do not know whether what they say is true. Moreover, we would not be able to know whether what they say is true unless we know what they say, and if we can know what they say independently of knowing whether it is true, we can also understand what they say independently of knowing whether it is true. That is why expressions of false beliefs (to be distinguished from the unintelligible use of words which cannot be understood as assertions of beliefs) are intelligible. And that is why actions for false beliefs about what is of value too are intelligible.

We should therefore be careful in understanding what Finnis is saying when he writes that 'to say that such knowledge is a value is simply to say that reference to the pursuit of knowledge makes intelligible (though not necessarily reasonable-all-things-considered) any particular instance of the human activity and commitment involved in such pursuit'. (62) Acting in pursuit of value makes the action intelligible. But so does (and Finnis does not deny this) action in the false belief that what it pursues is valuable. So, assuming for the sake of argument that

knowledge is not of value, people's actions in pursuit of knowledge may nonetheless be intelligible, for example if they pursue knowledge in the mistaken belief that it is valuable. In other words, we cannot infer the value of knowledge from the intelligibility of its pursuit. And the same goes for other beliefs in the value of this or that.

2. The difficulty of harmony

With these clarifications behind us I want to examine some questions about value, focussing on knowledge. I choose knowledge not only because it is Finnis's chosen central example, and not only because I have an independent interest in the question whether there is value to knowledge. It is also easier to examine than Finnis's other examples of basic values. So before looking at knowledge let me explain why it is a relatively easy case to consider.

Finnis's original list of basic values consisted, apart from knowledge, of life, play, aesthetic experience, friendship, practical reasonableness and religion. We were assured that other supposed basic goods are but 'ways or combinations of ways of pursuing (not always sensibly) and realising (not always successfully) one of the seven basic forms of good, or some combination of them' (NLNR 90). On its face at least some aspects of the list are surprising. For example some friendships and some religions or aesthetic experiences are without merit at all. Good friendships are good, and good religious experiences or lives, are good, but not all friendships nor all religious experiences or religious lives, one is inclined to say, derive any value from being friendships or from being religious.

It is clear, however, that when invoking friendship and religion Finnis intended to invoke only those of their manifestations that are good. He explains them in terms of harmony between people (friendship) and between people and the divine (religion). That explains what, in Finnis's view, is the good of those forms of good, and the explanation is open to question. Harmony came to assume greater prominence in Finnis's later listings of basic goods. At times one almost gets the impression that he thinks that there is only one value: harmony, and the different values are merely harmony between different elements of the world. My comments about the difficulty with harmony below will explain both the appearance of reduction to one value (harmony) and why it is misleading.

The question that troubles me is whether the proposition 'harmony is intrinsically, i.e. non-instrumentally, good' is a conceptual truth or not. If not, then in the current jargon it is, if true at all, a metaphysical truth. I doubt that it is a conceptual truth. Nor does Finnis take it to be one. Finnis defends the claim that knowledge, friendship and the things which constitute the other basic values are good by arguing that it is self-evident that they are. Conceptual truths may be self-evident truths, but I doubt that Finnis's defence of self-evidence is meant to

vindicate reliance on it in coming to realise conceptual truths.

But if not a conceptual truth I doubt that 'Harmony is a non-instrumental good' is true at all. Of course, sometimes it is good. But if it is only sometimes good then it is not harmony by itself that is good, but only harmony combined with (or in the context of) something else. There is something else that is making it good, or it is good only when combined with that something else. Think of harmony as a property of a tune, or a painting. It need not make the tune good. It may make it boring.

Perhaps there are at least two concepts of harmony one relatively formal and the others relatively substantive (I am using these terms in a non-technical way). The formal concept of harmony has it that anything is harmonious if it comprises parts or components that are arranged, or that function, as they should be (or combined so as to produce a good effect), and any number of items are harmonious if they are arranged or function as they should be or in ways that will produce a good effect. The substantive notions specify certain relations among the elements of an object such that it is (formally) harmonious if they obtain.

The problem is that saying, e.g. that friendship is good because it is a (formally) harmonious relationship is empty for it amounts to saying that friendship is good because it is a relationship that is as it should be. But saying that friendship is good because it is a (substantively) harmonious relationship is not, in the context in which the statements are made by Finnis, much more help. It is doubtful that there is only one substantive relationship between people that makes their relationship into a (good) friendship. It is likely that there are many different kinds of friendships marked (if harmonies are what makes for good friendships) by different kinds of harmonies. Further kinds of harmonies may make plays good, may make societies good, may make the relationships among states good, etc. Perhaps what is common to all of them is that they are all instances of the formal notion of harmony, but that is uninformative about what exactly makes them good. And unfortunately Finnis does not investigate the different substantive relationships that he implicitly invokes.

This omission means that we do not know what are the basic goods in Finnis's view. They are friendships when they are good friendships, religions that are good religions, and so on – but when are they good we are not told. That has the additional consequence of making it impossible to examine whether they are basic goods, and also impossible to examine whether harmony plays the role in making them good that Finnis claims. That last point may be important. I think, for example, that I live in harmony with many people, including many of whose existence I am unaware, who are not my friends. I also feel that there is much more to friendship than harmony, much more that makes friendships good as friendships than the harmony between the friends. But to find out in what ways I am wrong we need substantive

accounts of the different harmonious relationships various goods embody.

The advantage of the case of knowledge is that its examination can avoid these issues. I turn to Finnis's use of it in my attempt to clarify my own mind about the nature of values.

3. The place of self-evidence

A question that seems to me fundamental is what makes knowledge valuable? I suspect that Finnis took himself to have dealt with this question in his discussion of the self-evidence of basic values. But I believe that that issue does not touch my question. There are two matters that may be self-evident (and I express no view whether either is): it may be self-evident whether something, say knowledge, is valuable. It may also be self-evident what makes knowledge valuable. My question ('what makes knowledge valuable?') has nothing to do with the doubts about the value of knowledge. It seeks an explanation of its value (if it has one), an explanation of the claim that it has value. The claim that that too is self-evident is (if true) reassuring. But it does not actually give us the answer to the question. It is good to know that the answer is self-evident, but we also want to know what it is.

It is no use saying that because the answer is self-evident we already know it. Finnis rightly alerts us to the fact that not everyone knows all the self-evident truths. And he provides a personal example of this fact: as we know, he himself has changed his mind on the list of the basic goods, even though that these are the basic goods is (according to him) self-evident. But be that as it may, we need not assume that the question (what makes knowledge valuable) is posed by someone who does not know the answer. It is simply a request for the answer to be articulated. (Think of it by analogy to an exam question.) But is there an answer to the question 'what makes knowledge valuable?' And if there is, must it be possible to express the answer in words?

Some may suspect that the question has no answer. An answer to the question what makes A good could only refer to some other good, B, and state that A is good because it is B. Such explanations are frequently available and helpful, but their availability depends on A being a derivative good, something whose goodness derives from the fact that it is B. Basic goods cannot be explained in that way. They are basic, not derivative. But while it is true that basic goods cannot be reduced to other goods, it is possible that they can be explained, meaning that what makes each one of them the good it is can be explained. These explanations, if available, will be circular in that they will explain evaluative concepts using evaluative concepts. We know that the fundamental concepts all thought relies on cannot be explained in a non-circular way, but some wide circles have explanatory power.

Finnis underlines the intelligibility of values and reasons. Does that commit him to the possibility of explaining what it is about any value that makes it a value? I do not think that he explains what makes knowledge a value. So perhaps he thinks there is no answer to the question. He may be thinking that the fact that the value of knowledge is self-evident makes it intelligible without there being an explanation in language of what makes it a value. This is not a view shared by everyone who believes that some of our knowledge is self-evident. An alternative view is that one can acquire knowledge that P by coming to realise that P is self-evident only if one can understand P. We can have knowledge without understanding what we know. Some objects of knowledge may not be possible objects of understanding. For example, possibly that green is the colour of grass is not something we can understand. Those who have the concept "green" know some such truths, for the normal way of having the concept is to be able to identify green objects by looking at them. Blind or colour-blind people can have the concept without having that ability, but their knowledge of the colour of things is parasitic on others having it in the normal way: they know that among green things are those that sighted people can recognise as green by looking at them. However, "knowledge" and the concepts of other basic values do not seem to be concepts whose application can be recognised perceptually. At least they are not concepts whose application is primarily by perceptual recognition. There may be other truths whose understanding is not a possibility. But I agree with Finnis in his insistence on the intelligibility of value, and that seems to imply that it is possible not only to know that something is a value but also to understand what it is that makes it a value. It is of course possible to know without understanding that something is of value. But that knowledge presupposes the possibility of understanding.

Why must value be intelligible? A more subtle argument is called for, but briefly, it seems plausible that the primary way of identifying what has value is by pointing to features that make it valuable, features relevant to an explanation of what makes the valuable object valuable. The primary way of identifying that something is of value is that it has features or relations that make it valuable, features and relations that we can understand. It cannot be identified by possession of features that are irrelevant to an understanding of what makes it valuable. Compare explaining why rudeness is bad by the fact (let's assume that it is a fact) that it increases the addressees' body temperature with an explanation in terms of its hurting the addressees' feelings and impeding friendly interactions with them. The first cannot possibly be a way of identifying what conduct is rude, or that rudeness is bad, unless one was reliably informed of the connection between rudeness and body temperature by someone (possibly oneself) who could establish its existence because he is able to identify rudeness and its character in the primary way, the way that contributes to an explanation of what makes it bad.

I should underline that I assume neither that there is one privileged explanation (there are many and different ones that would be appropriate in different contexts), nor that anyone who knows of the value of something understands what makes it valuable (there are secondary, derivative ways of identifying what is of value). A more difficult question is whether (as I have been assuming in this description of the case for the intelligibility of value) the understanding of what makes anything of value valuable assumes the ability to explain that in language. After all we learn the nature of the different values not so much by explicit definition and instruction (though they can help) as by developing through experience and reflection, observation and imitation, a sense of what they are. Arguably, no complete understanding of basic values can be acquired by definition, however complex, alone.

These observations, however, while suggesting that the answer to the question what makes knowledge good cannot take the typical form of a definition, do not in the least suggest that the answer is ineffable, and that no explanation(s) in language would do. It may be true, for example, that the best way to teach someone what our values are (what we take to be of value) is to have them live with us and observe, yet surely we can also tell them in words what those values are. And we can do so in a way that enables the learner to apply the newly acquired concepts to new instances, in a variety of contexts, and that requires some understanding of the concept. So, experience suggests that it is possible to explain what makes something of value valuable, even if it is not possible to give a comprehensive explanation on any single occasion.

Why am I belabouring these points? Because Finnis's emphasis on the self-evident character of the value of knowledge raised in my mind not (or not only) the question whether self-evidence plays a role, but a desire to understand the role it plays: its significance and function. Self-evidence is often invoked to rebut scepticism. I think that at best it has only a small role in that drama. Scepticism, when serious, is not a brute doubting, or disinclination to believe. It is rooted in sophisticated arguments about various impossibilities: the so-called metaphysical impossibility of things like values, or properties like having value, existing, or rather being part of the fundamental furniture of the world, arguments about the impossibility of knowing what they are, given the ways knowledge can be acquired, and so on. Explanation and refutation, not self-evidence, assure us against scepticism. My preceding comments aimed to suggest that self-evidence as a source of knowledge or as a fundamental justifying condition does not provide an understanding of value. Rather it presupposes such an understanding. Following Descartes we should say that certainty can be reached when contemplating a clear and distinct idea, or proposition. So we need an answer to the question what makes knowledge a good before we can trust any sense of certainty, or feelings of self-evidence that knowledge is a

good. Self-evidence plays a role, if at all, only after all the hard work is done.

4. Various reasons for a single value?

When presenting knowledge as his central case of a basic value, Finnis explains that he considers only the non-instrumental value of knowledge (NLNR 59), and that he considers all knowledge as valuable in itself, in the sense that there is (non-instrumental) value in seeking, and in achieving, knowledge of any proposition. (NLNR 60). Instrumental value and instrumental reasons used to be taken as relatively simple and unproblematic kinds of value and reasons. But recent writings have shown it to be otherwise. I have written at length on the subject and will here understand the 'instrumental' to be the 'facilitative' namely preparatory, facilitative or causally efficient steps towards something one has an undefeated reason to pursue, whether or not it is among one's goals. So understood knowledge can have instrumental or facilitating value, though (a) not all knowledge has it, and (b) that value is derived. The case Finnis presents is for the basic value of knowledge.

Finnis tells us that 'to think of knowledge as a value is not to think that every true proposition is equally worth knowing' (NRNL 62). This last claim deserves scrutiny. I take it to mean that different instances of knowledge may have different value and that there may be reasons of different strength to acquire knowledge of different items of knowledge. Obviously, there may be value in knowing some truths that does not depend on or derive from the value of knowledge, and that may make knowing them more valuable than knowing others. For example, knowledge of some moral truths may be part of what it is to be a moral person. That may make knowledge of those truths more valuable, more important, than knowledge of some other truths. That may be due to the fact that having that knowledge is valuable as an instantiation of two distinct values (with apologies for the awkward way I put the point). But it may appear that all instances of one value would be of equal importance, and that one value would generate one reason, a reason of the same strength wherever it applies. After all if the value provides the reason and the value is the same how can the reason vary in any respect, including in its strength? How can knowledge of different propositions differ in how valuable it is *qua* knowledge?

One way it can be so is where the value in question can be realised to different degrees: Some paintings may be of greater artistic merit than others. They are all valuable because of their artistic merit, but they have that value in different degrees. Various experiences may be valuable because they are enjoyable, but they may be enjoyable to various degrees. Possibly at least some paintings and some experiences are of different degrees of value because even though they all realise but one value they realise it to various degrees. The possibility that a single value property can be realised to various degrees is problematic and requires analysis.

But we can sidestep this matter here, since knowledge does not admit of degrees. So if knowing that P is more valuable than knowing that Q, this is not because there is a higher degree of knowledge in knowing that P than in knowing that Q. The difference, it would seem, is not in the knowing but in the known. But that difference cannot affect how valuable knowing that item is *qua* knowledge.

But perhaps this is too quick. Perhaps the value of knowledge is a kind of generic value, and there are various specific values subsumed under it. Take as an example a possible difference in value between knowledge of eclipses and knowledge of the French Revolution. If there is a difference in the value of these species of knowledge it cannot be in their object. It cannot be that knowing about eclipses is more (or less) valuable than knowing what happened, and why, during the French Revolution because somehow the laws of nature are more valuable than the events of the revolution. This does not even make sense. Nor can it be due to the fact that the different types of knowledge have different functions in the life of different people: arguably it is more important (more valuable?) for historians to know history than to know science. That is due to the role knowledge of this or that has in their lives. It marks a difference not in the value of scientific v. historical knowledge as such, but in their value to this person or that. Finnis mentions separately the possibility of varying degrees in value that different areas of knowledge have for one person or another. The variations in value I am trying to understand are variations in the value of knowledge, not in its value for X or Y.

Arguably there is another difference between scientific and historical knowledge. The first but not the second presupposes a reasonably high level of competence in mathematics. The second but not the first engages the empathy of those who possess the knowledge. Do we not have here at least the possibility that different kinds of knowledge while being the same in being knowledge vary in value because they require different mental capacities? It is common to think that the possession of, and some of the uses of many of our capacities are intrinsically valuable. Possibly when people assign different value to different types of knowledge they are influenced by awareness of the different abilities they require. Note that such views cannot underpin the claim that knowledge is valuable in itself. These abilities exist independently of their role in securing knowledge, or some types of knowledge, and they can be manifested in other contexts too. Admittedly, some kinds of knowledge are occasions for the display or use of those abilities. However, not all uses of valuable abilities have any value at all (some murders involve impressive use of important abilities). The use of empathy or other abilities in some knowledge is valuable only if that knowledge is otherwise valuable. True, if knowledge is valuable in itself then, other things being equal, knowledge that involves empathy may be (by that fact) made better than knowledge that does not.

But generally speaking that would be only marginally relevant. We do not normally think that knowledge is admirable as a display of mental powers and abilities. We see that most clearly when considering cases where we do admire people for having the ability to get to know something: 'Jim is so clever', we may say, 'starting from scratch he got on top of quantum mechanics in less than a week'. True, but normally when we find knowledge valuable considerations of this kind are far from our thoughts. To conclude, the engagement of different abilities in different cases of knowledge can make some of them marginally of greater value than others, but (a) only if the knowledge in which the abilities are engaged is independently valuable and (b) it cannot explain the familiar view that knowledge of history is more important than knowledge of local gossip and like opinions.

Another possibility to consider is that knowledge of different areas, or different kinds of knowledge may be constituent elements of different more complex values. This seems highly likely. A variety of valuable occupations, pastimes, styles of life and the like require a degree of mastery of knowledge of various areas (think of a clinical psychologist, a stock broker, a youth guide, a hang glider or just about anything). This does not affect the reasons one has to pursue knowledge in any particular area unless one pursues the form of activity of which it is a component. Arguably, however, knowledge of some subjects or areas is part of the ideal of a good human life. That would provide everyone with reason to pursue such knowledge, and arguably, other things being equal, knowledge of these matters is of greater importance than knowledge of other areas. Possibly it is more valuable because other knowledge in itself has no value. After all, knowledge that is part of the ideal of a good life would be valuable even if knowledge is not valuable in itself. If it is not then the argument for the superior value of that knowledge does not show that some cases of knowledge can have different value as knowledge.

5. Is Knowledge valuable?

Knowledge that is part of an ideal of a good human life would be valuable as part of that ideal even if knowledge is not valuable in itself. It could be that knowledge that is a constituent part of the good life is valuable not merely as a component of the good life, but also in itself. Think of an example: assume that knowledge of what makes life good is part of the ideal of a good life. It seems reasonable that it is part of the good life because it is good in itself, and that it is good in itself not because it is knowledge, but because it is knowledge-of-this-matter. Having this knowledge constitutes an orientation towards the world and life in it. It is not mere theoretical knowledge. But some kinds of purely theoretical knowledge may be intrinsically valuable, on analogous grounds. For example, knowing how things work where one is in the world, and I mean both having the knowledge that enables one to understand people and other

animals, their conduct and social processes, and having the technical knowledge that enables one to understand how the machines and tools one uses and those that service one's needs work, having that knowledge also affects, meaning constitutes part of, one's mode of being in the world, one's orientation to oneself, other people and the environment one lives in.

Could it be that when knowledge is valuable in itself what makes it valuable are factors of these kinds? There may also be other features that make some knowledge valuable. Perhaps some knowledge is formative of ways of relating to the world, of living in the world. Some knowledge may be valuable because it opens valuable opportunities for those who have it. And there is of course knowledge that is good for this person or that because of its role in their life, and there is always the important facilitative value that so much knowledge has.

So, being part of a valuable orientation towards oneself and the world makes some knowledge valuable. Being part of options for various activities and pursuits may make some (possibly different areas of) knowledge valuable, and some knowledge may be valuable for one person or another, because of its relations to their chosen relationships and pursuits. As these diverse grounds do not all apply to the same kinds of, or domains of knowledge their existence does not contribute to a case for thinking that knowledge is good in itself. Moreover, all of this leaves much knowledge without value at all. Some cats were born on 20 November 720 A.D. But is there any value at all in knowing how many? There appears to be an indefinite number of truths knowledge of which is without value, and which moreover, are not objects of human curiosity. If Finnis is right then there is some value in having such knowledge. But not knowing what, in his view, makes knowledge valuable makes it difficult to assess his view.