

On standards and values: Between finite actuality and infinite possibility

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Abstract

This paper explores the relation between subjects and standards in a way that is informed by a process orientation to theoretical psychology. Standards are presented as objectifications of values designed to generalize and stabilize experiences of value. Standards are nevertheless prone to becoming 'parodic' in the sense that they can become obstacles to the actualization of the values they were designed to incarnate. Furthermore, much critical social science has mishandled the nature of standards by insisting that values are nothing but local and specific constructions in the mundane world of human activity. To rectify this problem, this article reactivates a sense of the difference between the idea of a finite world of activity and a world of value which points beyond and exceeds passing circumstance. Resources for the re-activation of this difference – which is core to a processual grasp of self, memory and value – are found in the thinking of A.N. Whitehead, Max Weber, Marcel Proust and Soren Kierkegaard.

Introduction

This paper explores the relation between subjects and standards in a way that is informed by a process orientation to theoretical psychology. The approach takes activity at various levels of process as the leaping-off point for what Steve Brown and myself have called a *psychology without foundations* (Brown and Stenner, 2009). I say 'leaping-off point' deliberately so as to avoid use of foundational rhetoric. The materialistic notion of foundations is hopelessly inadequate as a basis for thinking about psychosocial issues in a process-oriented way because it suggests a metaphor of a solid and preferably concrete sub-structure upon which a structure – perhaps a house – can be built. The principle at play is that a firm foundation is needed in order to stop or limit movement. Stationary stability is assumed to be the primary value, and this might be quite correct when it comes to architecture designed to endure on terra firma. But if movement is a value one is aiming at, then a firm foundation is likely to be an obstacle. This approach does not imply that stability has no value. Rather, it implies that any stability that does exist be construed as an achievement – involving ongoing harmonization and integration – and not as something that we take for granted as already existing, transcendent and basic to things.

I will argue that standards are objectifications of values designed to generalize and stabilize experiences of value. These experiences are core to psychosocial integration in two senses: they are core to a personal sense of continuity and internal coherence in the face of change, and they are core to social coordination. A key part of this argument will be that standards are nevertheless prone to becoming 'parodic' (paradoxical and parasitical parodies of themselves) in the

sense that they can become obstacles to the actualization of the values they were designed to incarnate. Taking a static architectural model of foundations as a *standard* for judging psychosocial processes, for instance, will yield a parodic standard to the extent that it will be an obstacle to grasping forms of stability-through-movement (like that achieved by a child's spinning top). I will suggest that much critical social science has mishandled the nature of standards by insisting that values are nothing but local and specific constructions in the mundane world of human activity. This mishandling has its origins in an understandable reaction to what might be called the *standardization of life* associated with the machine technology and institutional bureaucracy of industrial capitalism. As Walter Benjamin noted (1940: 314), much critical, romantic and vitalist thought emerged in an effort to "grasp 'true' experience, as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses". This syndrome assumes a fundamental split between standards and values and in this sense it is part of what Whitehead called the "bifurcation of nature" into irreconcilable subjective and objective aspects. To rectify this problematic tendency to aspire to a pristine mode of value experience untainted by standardization, it is necessary to reconnect standards and values by reactivating a sense of the difference between the idea of a finite world of activity in the here-and-now, and the idea of a world of value which points beyond and exceeds passing circumstance. Resources for this re-activation are found in the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead, but to do this without the crutch of some sort of transcendently given metaphysics will require engagement with the unorthodox psychology worked out by Marcel Proust and Soren Kierkegaard. Together these resources point to a very different way of thinking of the human self or subject in relation to value and standards.

Standards and values

Standards, as argued in the introduction to this Special Issue, are "generalized models of and for practice, in certain limited aspects". Why "in certain limited aspects"? Because, as is also written, a standard is an "abstract reproduction of selected aspects of practice and being, used as tool and ideal". This word "ideal" indicates the sense in which standardization involves a certain objectification of what we may call *values*. The aspects of practice that are selected are those which are preferred or prized. I want to argue that we cannot understand standards without understanding the values they incarnate. But at the same time, the standards are not to be mistaken for the values. Standards are abstractions or abstract reproductions. To be valuable they must ground or be grounded in experiences of value.

Informally, for example, the valued performance of a great centre-forward in a world cup game, or of a team with a new formula for success sets a new standard for those who follow. More formally, a quality car manufacturer standardizes its production process to ensure the delivery of brand quality despite diversity of production sites. Universities set standards for what counts as degree level essay writing and PhD level thesis production, and university research is in turn assessed by way of benchmarks of research excellence.

The notion of a value suggests something more subjective than the notion of a standard, and hence we enter into the question of the relation of subjects and standards. This is put with military precision by General Sir Richard Dannatt in an online document called *Values and Standards of the British Army* (MOD 2014: 5): “The Values are about character and spirit: the Standards define our actions and behaviour: I expect everyone in the Army to abide by these Values and Standards”. Values, on this account are subjective in the sense that they concern the “intangible character and spirit” proper to the moral principles that guide our development into “the sort of people we should be”. Standards, by contrast, are the “authoritative yardsticks that define how we behave and on which we judge and measure that behaviour”.

If we value something we prize it and we praise it and we appraise it as *important*. Value is thus about *importance*. These notions of prizing, praising and appraising imply a subject. To talk of value as subjective, however, is neither to suggest that it is somehow unreal or illusory or inconsequential, nor to imply that it pertains to the level of the individual (for more detail on this rethinking of subjectivity see Stenner, 2008). On the contrary, calling value subjective points to the sense in which evaluation is an active process of modification of the events of the world, a preference whereby certain things are admitted and other things omitted, certain things accepted and other things rejected, certain things enjoyed with pleasure, others excluded with disgust. We are close here to Heidegger’s (1990) ontological concept of *concern* (*Besorgen*) where he draws attention to the original sense of this word as a selective process of sifting or sieving. These operations of selectivity are subjective in the sense that they require and presuppose a perspective from which the evaluations and selections are made. I thus draw attention to this cluster of related words ‘prizing’, ‘praising’ and ‘appraising’ since these indicate ways in which subjects prefer certain experiences over others, thus indicating the more or less active selectivity associated with the notion of a subject.

Returning to the relation between values and standards, we could therefore say that through standardization subjective values are crystallized, objectified or incarnated into publically available resources or tools (like the ‘yardstick’). This is partly what it means to say that standards are *generalized* models. We might say that they generalize beyond a given concrete but perhaps fleeting subjective experience of value. They generalize beyond a particular and temporal experience which happens and then perishes. In fact, a standard generalizes a fleeting experience of value in two distinguishable senses or directions. The first is a spatial and social generalization. The standard generalizes socially in the sense that, being publically available (objective and enduring), it facilitates the possibility of sharing the value or extending the possibility of its experience spatially, as it were, to other contemporary people. Standards are, in this sense, core to the emergence of the social as such. Perhaps the first standards were the icons, symbols and totems around which collectives gathered and self-identified. A heraldic standard or a war flag, for example, enables a brutally simple socially shared expression of what is *important* about and for the collective that identifies with and groups around its colours and images. The second is a temporal generalization. Thanks to standards we can evaluate our activity and

modify it in order to reach the standard *again* or even, if we are very successful, set new standards by enhancing value. We might say that values are objectified into standards so that many future experiences of value become more likely.

Standards as tools for generalization in this sense are involved in introducing stability and predictability into the business of attaining or realizing values. I suggest that it is this feature of introducing stability that underlies the double-edged sense in which the subjects who *establish* standards are also *formed* by them. Through the generalization of subjectively experienced value the subject is transformed and stabilized, on the one hand, into a social subject with a social *standing* in relation to a standard, and, on the other, into an enduring subject with a stable and coherent *standpoint* in relation to a standard. Here I am drawing attention to the connection between a second cluster of words that are connected to standard, including state, station, stay, stability, stand, static, establish, status and statesman, each of which evokes a sense of occupying space in an enduring manner.

This same feature of introducing stability helps to explain the double meaning of the word value. In a 2013 volume of the new journal 'valuation studies' for instance, François Vatin (2013) employs a French distinction between evaluation (*évaluer*) and valorization (*valoriser*) to contrast two senses of value. Evaluation is about determining, assessing or appraising the value of something. How tasty is this tomato? How good is the research output of the University? These are evaluations of things in order to determine the values that they embody or realize. Valorization, by contrast, is about producing or increasing value. How can we improve the research output of the University? How can we enhance the taste of these tomatoes so that we can sell more of them? Vatin suggests that this distinction is confused in the English language, but in fact this is not strictly true. The process philosopher A.N. Whitehead makes a similar distinction using the words "evaluation" and "valuation" in a lecture delivered in 1941 (Whitehead, 1948). Much like Vatin, he uses evaluation to mean "the analysis of particular facts in the World of Activity to determine the values realized and the values excluded" (Whitehead, 1948: 62). Valuation, by contrast, is a more active adjustment of the potentialities that different values have for being realized. Valuation takes into account the necessary relevance of different values to each other, and aims to enhance the capacity for their realization in the world.

Either way, it can be seen that standards mediate and transform both senses of value. On the one hand, the standard provides a resource or a model or a metric for evaluating relevant facts. According to industry standards, for instance, is the tomato firm enough for the value of transportability, red enough and sweet enough for its aesthetic value? Does it grow quickly enough? And on the other hand the standard provides more or less explicit criteria for valuation in the sense of maintaining and enhancing these valued qualities through their generalization.

Parodic standards

We might sum this point up by saying that standards mediate values, and in so doing aim to generalize them. The fact that standards mediate processes of evaluation and valuation alerts us to a downside of standards. Let me first state this somewhat abstractly. Any mediator has a tendency to take over the message that it mediates, and in this sense to become the message (Serres, 1982). If standards are the medium and values are the message, then the downside would be that we risk standards coming to be the message. In spatially and temporally generalizing values, we might say that standards *establish* values and to some extent *institutionalize* them. What was once a modification of the events of the world through concrete experiences of value can become an habitual and automated process that can take on a life of its own. One can make a judgement concerning what to admit and what to omit, what to accept and what to reject without any genuine experiential enjoyment of value. In other words, as the medium becomes the message, the standard eclipses the value and risks becoming a parody of itself, especially if the domain of application does not remain stable. Instead of a generalization of value, all that is generalized is a ritualistic imitation of the standard, a hollowed out parody of value that, under certain circumstances, can become an obstacle to the realization of actual value.

Since it might be helpful to have a term for such counter-productive standards, I propose we call them parodic standards, especially if we let this imply not just that they are parodies but also that they are parasitical¹ upon the values they subvert and paradoxical in the effects they generate on practice. We see all these senses at play in the various research excellence frameworks where researchers come to base their research work on the dictates of standards because the value of research income takes precedence over the value of advancing knowledge. Standards can become parodic in many different ways that cannot be sufficiently dealt with here. For example, standards in social science or in the humanities are likely to become parodic if they are modeled on those that apply to the natural sciences; standards developed for quantitative research become parodic when applied to qualitative methodologies; standards applicable to laboratory medicine become parodic when applied to the clinic, and so forth.

Parodic standards in critical social science

Here we reach a key problem the current Special Issue was designed to address. Namely the problem of the divide between research traditions that aim to *establish* standards, and those that *critique* their impact on people's everyday lives. There seems to be a divide between those who see their job as nothing but critique of standards, and those who see their job as nothing but the

¹ Marx's reflections on capital as dead labour (Capital, chapter 10 section 1, volume 1) evoke a similar dynamic of values (living labour) becoming parasitized by inflexible and imposed parodic standards. Dead labour "vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks". Of course recognition of parasitism opens up the possibility of a symbiosis that reconnects value and standard.

establishment, monitoring and enforcement of standards. Critique is justified by virtue of this tendency for standards to eclipse values. But critique can also add to the problem of eclipsing value if it does not attend to the positive problem of how to generalize values by way of standards. In other words, there is a value of critique, but this value must be evaluated against the backdrop of other values which we might hope to actualize. If critique itself becomes a parodic standard, it risks becoming a force which excludes other important values from concrete realization.

Part of the problem here is that critical social science is in the process of implicitly developing a standard view of *values*, even when it claims radical originality for itself. In a nut-shell, values are seen as social creations which are only understandable as concrete historically and culturally specific constructions, inherently variable, fleeting and contingent. Value, in short, is thought about only in terms of what Whitehead (1948: 61) calls the “World of activity” (and, as we will see, Whitehead contrasts this with the “World of value”), and to the world of human social activity at that. The World of activity is the temporal world or the creative world through which the present creates the future in transforming the past. Naturally, if we adopt a process perspective we cannot assume that the worldly world of human social activity simply exists as a static given. It obviously doesn’t. It is an ongoing self-construction, structured by power relations. It is autopoietic in the sense that manifold events in the now of the present ongoingly enact an immediate future out of what is inherited from the past. The standard critical social science view today grasps this process view, but only in a limited way. It addresses the problem of a bifurcated nature, but only by assuming a vaguely materialistic historicist monism which in fact compounds the problem of bifurcation. Hence we are told over and again that values are not things that ‘are’ but things we do. Furthermore, far from being ‘timeless’, we are told that values are always ‘enacted’ in particular times and places, informed by the symbolic resources of our cultures.

This sort of ‘performative’ stance is basic to most of the currently acceptable social scientific epistemologies, such as social constructionism, critical realism, actor-network-theory and affect theory. Values, according to this view, must be dragged down from the lofty heights of universal, eternal, transcendental pretensions and treated as mundane constructs which are enacted in multiple ways in specific social practices. From this perspective, far from *contrasting* a world of value with a world activity (the better to show their *integration*), we should *identify* value with activity, and insist that values and their practices are multiple, contradictory and contingent. No doubt this stance – which builds very selectively on Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals - is an understandable response to those who claim universality for their preferred values in a world of obvious inequality, change and heterogeneity. In this we are still enjoying Nietzsche’s joy at unmasking high minded and sweet smelling values as dirty, stinking lies concealing death, self-deception and cowardice. As suggested above, the flip side of this view of value is an implicit reaction to the concept of standards that is associated, as Benjamin puts it, with industrialization and its “standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses”.

Let me give as an example some of the recent work of Anne-Marie Mol, a thinker whose work I very much admire, but who in this respect does not take us further than this standard view. Her 2013 article with Tom Heuts focuses on the concrete social and material practices through which tomatoes are valued, or at least in so far as these practices are referred to in interviews with various experts, like tomato growers, sellers, buyers and cooks. These authors note Vatin's distinction between evaluation and valorization and they repeat the classic gesture that these valuations are performative: they are implicated not just in describing but also in changing the small part of the world with which we are involved, in this case tomatoes. They use Mol's notions of "care" and careful "tinkering" to get at the ways in which different parties concern themselves with modifying and adjusting things to do with tomatoes according to the values embedded in their aims. First and foremost, for instance, tomatoes should be good to eat, and so a value of tastiness should be realized in the practice of eating one. The main message, however, is that Mol and Heuts were able to identify 5 different registers for the evaluation of tomatoes. The list is not terribly surprising. Namely, their cost, their suitability for handling, their naturalness, their sensual qualities, including taste, colour and shape, and the way they compare with tomatoes from the past (I will return to this last theme when discussing Proust). Naturally, some of these can clash in particular situations, as when the value of growing a tasty red tomato clashes with the value of growing them cheaply to ensure profit.

The exhibition of this variety of registers of value is then taken as a basis for five main conclusions:

1. There are many registers of value, each with their own working definition of a good tomato;
2. Within any one of these registers, experts may in turn operate with different meanings of value or "the good" (under "cost", for example, sellers want to earn money, buyers to save);
3. Different situations yield additional variation in valuation (juicy tomatoes are good for salads but not in sandwiches);
4. The registers in turn are not even unitary, and so break down into further variety, situational specificity, and personal contingency (within the sensual register, taste may compete with shape or colour);
5. If this contingency, fragmentation and specificity were not enough, we must add to it the various additional contingencies that come into play when relations between the registers are taken into account (as noted above when production cost clashes with tastiness).

The message, in short, is a repetition of what we might call the mantra of multiplicity, complexity and cultural and historical specificity. Values are resolutely confined to the world of activity: a mixed multiplicity of events in time that come and go. As they tellingly put it: "Time and again there are new shifts, contrasts and surprises" (140). Hence the conclusion that "jointly these complexities imply that it is impossible to fit the case of 'good tomatoes' into a nice schematic overview" (140). It seems that the nice and simple schematic overview of 5 registers was really just a ruse to draw us away from any sense of clarity by bombarding us with the repeated insistence of impossible complexity.

In case this apparently empirical conclusion were not sufficient, the other main conclusion is that as researchers and academics we should give up any ambition of creating a theory of valuation or indeed of any concepts that seek “to be valid between and beyond cases” (139). We should abandon any efforts to refine our thinking because “the lesson is that insights do not need to be schematized” (140). In fact, the authors boast that they “abstain from fusing our different cases into a common scheme” (140) and that “throughout this text... we have carefully abstained from firmly defining our crucial terms and we have no ambition whatsoever to legislate how others should be using them” (139). Whilst on one level this degree of openness is admirable, surely it is paradoxical, and perhaps even something of a double-bind, to identify one’s terms as being at the same time *crucial* and yet resolutely undefined. The likely consequence is to unleash and revel in the same contingency and multiplicity of meaning at the level of the meaning of one’s own concepts. All is shifting and unstable, with new surprises coming time and again without hope of stability or clarity. Could it be that in the name of being a cutting edge critical social thinker we must give up any claim to understanding anything but a single, discrete, concrete case, with no relationship to the rest of the universe? The answer, according to Mol and Heuts, is ‘no’ because we cannot even claim to understand a single case and we should in fact also give up this claim too. As they put it, it is “difficult or impossible to draw coherent conclusions about valuing in a single case, such as that of ‘good tomatoes’” (140). In short, since there is nothing to know about value beyond isolated particular fragments of social action, we should give up any pretence of knowing anything.

We find in this rather chaotic celebration of the contingency of value an implicit protest against the operation of standards. There is hence a tacit effort to entirely separate (bifurcate) values from standards in the name of protecting a pristine image of value from the taint of standardization. The concept of “care”, for instance, operates as a weapon articulated against what is perceived to be the *control* and *domination* at play in standardization (Mol and Heuts, 2013: 140). Domination and control, we are told, are about *guaranteeing* “improvements” by forcing their implementation. The object of improvement is thus “overpowered”, “tamed” and otherwise forced into submission to the standards (141). “Care” by contrast, is about respectfully helping something to improve, encouraging positive developments and “tinkering with weaknesses” and otherwise managing manifold unpredictable events in a sharing and co-constituting kind of way. In other words the *value* of care is endorsed in a modification of the old theme of persuasion versus force. This is all very well and it is good to speak up for the value of care and the importance of caring for value, but this has little to do with standardization as such or with the relationship between values and standards as such. Any serious study of standards highlights that their application always involves ‘care’ in the sense of unique people in concrete situations who must interpret the abstract standard and reconstruct its relevance to their own particulars, taking into account the numerous values always at play (Axel, 2002; Bowker & Star, 1999; Timmermans & Berg, 2003).

It is notable that beyond this implicit and value laden contrast between care and

standards, Mol and Heuts hardly mention standards in their article. When they discuss how their participants care for tomatoes they state that “most of the mundane practices where tomatoes are being improved have not been tamed to fit standards” (Mol and Heuts, 2013: 140). But there are - as I assume Mol and Heuts are well aware even if they do not mention them - well-defined EU marketing standards for tomatoes. These recognize four commercial types (round, ribbed, oblong and cherry) with three classes (extra, class 1 and class 2) and which specify minimum requirements (that they be intact, sound, clean, fresh, pest-free, unblemished, dry and free of any foreign smell or taste). There are provisions about transportation, sizing, presentation (including uniformity and packaging) and marking for identification. None of this precludes the concrete and specific negotiations of caring for tomatoes, but is designed to generalize a number of values recognized by customers and producers. This is not to say, of course, that these standards do not risk becoming parodic: indeed they do. But to dismiss standards *as such* on this basis is not in fact to care for the baby of values, but to throw it out with the bathwater of standards.

I have said enough by way of criticizing this example of what I take to be the standard critical view on values at play in the social sciences. Obviously, from this starting point Mol and Heuts are not in a good position to start suggesting or establishing standards. All they can offer is one more variant on the deconstruction of value in the hopeful name of some unstandardized version of care. To escape the impasse of the split between research that establishes standards and that which critically assesses their impact on lives we need to take a distance from these usual ways of thinking about values and standards. In particular, I suggest that we must risk calling into question the idea that standards and values are only thinkable in terms of the temporal world of activity with its unceasing welter of changeable events. This, I must stress, is not to deny the obvious relevance of this world of activity, and neither is it to embrace mysticism or essentialism.

A clue here lies in the fact that, as I have already stressed, standards and values *working together* serve precisely to *generalize* beyond a particular experience which happens and then perishes. I argued that a standard generalizes a value in two ways, the first social and spatial, and the second temporal. If this is the case then in generalizing values, standards precisely militate against the experience of a chaotic, unceasing and unpredictable welter of disconnected events that Mol and Heuts appear to celebrate (and that Whitehead identifies with the world of activity). In identifying values purely with local, contingent and transient forms of activity, we obscure this sense in which they form a basis from which that world can be criticized and selectively shaped. Likewise, in refusing to generalize beyond cases, we miss the sense in which this is precisely what values and standards *do*. They bridge differences and forge commonalities amongst the chaos. The basic feature of value is that certain facts of experience are treated as more *important* than others, and that ‘importance’ relates to the forging of commonalities between experiences. I suggested that, through their values, the subject is transformed and stabilized, in that their standards provide them with a social standing and an intersubjectively recognizable standpoint. That is to say, on the one hand, they are stabilized into a social subject with a social standing in

relation to a standard, and, on the other, into a temporally enduring subject with a coherent standpoint in relation to a standard. The standard embodying its value is precisely what enables the subject to performatively create or at least modify and refashion their world and hence, within obvious limits, to construct it as more stable, enduring, livable and valuable than it otherwise would be. This process of *marking and memorializing importance* is basic to what we should understand by human *culture*.

The World of Activity (matters of fact) and the World of Value (matters of importance)

If what I have argued has merit, then standards and values can not be entirely consigned to the factual world of activity as it exists in the 'now' of practice, because they are implicated precisely in the transformation of that world. Standards and values introduce the possibility of a critical distance from the 'here and now' of the world of activity, a critical distance that facilitates the process of its transformation. In his famous essay on objectivity, Max Weber (1949: 544) makes a similar distinction between ultimate values and the inexhaustible temporal flux of empirical reality:

The belief which we all have in some form or other, in the meta-empirical validity of ultimate and final values, in which the meaning of our existence is rooted, is not incompatible with the incessant changefulness of the concrete viewpoints, from which empirical reality gets its significance. Both these views are, on the contrary, in harmony with each other. Life with its irrational reality and its store of possible meanings is inexhaustible. The concrete form in which value-relationship occurs remains perpetually in flux, ever subject to change in the dimly seen future of human culture. The light which emanates from those highest value-ideas always falls on an ever changing finite segment of the vast chaotic stream of events, which flows away through time.

Weber here neatly sums up what Mol and Heuts see as the only possible world for values: the concrete form of an ever changing perpetual flux of finite viewpoints shifting situation by situation. But Weber does not see this as incompatible with the notion of "ultimate values" whose light falls on this flux, enabling its transformation. He sees no incompatibility between the idea of a realm of value-ideas (which roots the meaning of our existence), and this vast and chaotic stream of events flowing away through time with its inexhaustible and ever changing store of possible meanings. In fact, Weber sees a "harmony" between these "views". The concrete temporal flux gets its very significance from the value-ideals.

Whitehead (1948) makes exactly this distinction and relationship in the work mentioned earlier. He suggests a "World of value" that is distinguishable as a conceptual abstraction from the "World of activity". To avoid accusations of mysticism, essentialism or dualism, it is important to stress with Whitehead that this distinction is a self-conscious conceptual abstraction. Indeed, it is an abstraction designed to *avoid* the kinds of transcendental accounts (often

associated with Platonism and Cartesianism) that presuppose a real or ontological duality in nature. Of course there *is only one world*, but Whitehead suggests that this single world shows up from at least two important perspectives (Weber echoes this when he writes of “views”) in these two aspects. Each perspective is an abstraction that mutually presupposes the other. When we think of the World of activity, we emphasize the finite multiplicity of mortal things in their flux and change and in their factual temporal nature. When we think of the World of value, by contrast, we emphasize persistence, since “its essence is not rooted in any passing circumstance”. Value, in this sense, is that which generalizes its *importance* beyond passing circumstance. It always points *from* the flux, but it points *towards* what persists within and beyond the flux. But since the two worlds are abstractions from a single totality, in the context of that totality value always refers to fact and fact always refers to value. Value has no meaning apart from by reference to the world of passing fact (i.e. by reference to what is evaluated and valued). But at the same time, the fact of a given circumstance is only valuable to the extent that it participates in a value that exceeds it.

Of course it is the easiest thing for a postmodern critic to say that it is ‘dualistic’ to separate a world of value from a world of activity. My point is that this *conceptual* distinction is necessary if we are to grasp the all important *combination* of value and standard and if we are to avoid their implicit polarization and mutual isolation (which results in the paradoxical name of a unitary world of contingent activity). The concept of a world of value provides us with a way of understanding classic concepts like timelessness, infinity and immortality but precisely without assuming these to be transcendental realities that exist like Platonic forms or mystical essences.

In fact, one of Mol and Heuts’ participants points in this direction when they begin actually to touch upon the value of tomatoes. Although the comment is quickly passed over (2013: 139), this participant, who is a cook, says: “When a tomato is good, you don’t have to do much. Just a drop of balsamic. Or olive oil, pepper and salt. And then you are in heaven.” Being in “heaven” is a reference to the eternal or infinite quality of value, but we need not assume a real transcendent realm with pearly gates and full of angels eating platonic tomatoes. We need only recognize that the taste of a *good* tomato serves to embody something of the value and importance possible in tomatoes. Such an experience can only be rooted in a concrete encounter of tasting, but it exceeds that passing circumstance, enduring in memory and begging for its eternal return. The Italians speak in such circumstances of the *death* of the tomato: through perishing it attains a degree of eternity. They also say “see Naples and die”, since we too can happily die having acquired the immortality associated with true value.

In the next part of the paper I pursue this theme of distinguishing eternal from temporal and infinite from finite. To avoid a metaphysical point of departure that treats the realm of value as entirely transcendent we require at this point a psychology without foundations concerned with how value is experienced. This must recognize the immanent unity of value and fact in a world of process

grasped not just as the brute change of perpetual flux but as creative advance. To this end I will draw my psychological inspiration from Marcel Proust and Soren Kierkegaard. Both thinkers work with an equivalent distinction between a finite and temporary world of activity and a realm of value - always in intimate dialogue with concrete activity - which points beyond any passing circumstance, emphasizing persistence. The account of Proust's psychology I offer is further developed elsewhere (Stenner, 2015).

Mind out of time: experiences of value in Proust

Marcel Proust's (2000) *A la recherche du temps perdu* is rightly prized as a high-point of modern reflection on the nature of time and memory, but it also speaks to our problem of value as related to concrete experience which points beyond passing circumstance². Towards the end of the novel, Marcel enters the courtyard of the Guermantes mansion in a gloomy and absent-minded mood. He is forced to move sharply backwards to avoid a car he fails to see coming. In so doing he trips against some uneven paving stones. In struggling to rebalance himself he experiences the sensation of putting his foot on a stone that is slightly lower than its neighbour. This physical sensation brings an instant and profound feeling of happiness in which "all anxiety about the future, all intellectual doubts" (217) disappeared as if by magic. The anxious thoughts from a moment ago about his lack of talent and doubts about the value of art lose all importance. Marcel immediately links the happy feeling to other fleeting but significant moments in his life: the trees he once drove past in Balbec, the twin steeples at Martinville, the sensations evoked by a passage in Vinteuil's sonata and the taste of a Madeleine cake dipped in tea. Unlike on these previous occasions, however, he was now determined to understand the deeper causes of this feeling. It was as if the uneven paving-stones had acted as a physical portal to something of profound value, the *importance* of which he would not only refuse to neglect, but would memorialize in his artwork.

Ignoring the amused glances of the onlooking chauffeurs, Marcel tries to repeat the stumble. Repeating the physical movement is not sufficient, but by forgetting his surroundings and recapturing the feeling of the first moment of uneven footing, he could once again summon the elusive experience. This time, in a flash, he recognised its source: he had stood on uneven stones many years before in St Mark's Cathedral in Venice. Much as the taste of the madeleine had recalled lost sensations from Combray, re-experiencing the uneven paving-stones had restored all the other sensations and images to which it had been linked one day

² In evaluating Proust we must also avoid the assumption that *either* his work is somehow timeless *or* it is an expression of a given socio-cultural milieu. Walter Benjamin is doubtless correct, for example, when he makes the point that Proust's re-working of Bergson's vitalism "may be regarded as an attempt to produce experience, as Bergson imagines it, in a synthetic way under today's social conditions" (315). Proust's work is thus the product of a concrete and particular set of encounters (Benjamin astutely points to absence of *rituals* in Proust's oeuvre), but this is not to question its value *beyond* its time and its continued capacity to transform its readers. In fact, I have suggested elsewhere that in this respect Proust's work can be seen as a functional equivalent to rituals in a de-ritualized epoch (Stenner, 2015).

in the past: sensations which had been waiting intact in their place for just this moment.

Sensitized by his efforts, Marcel goes on to have a succession of new and directly comparable experiences. First, on entering the Guermantes mansion a butler asks him to wait in a sitting room. When the butler accidentally knocks a spoon against a plate, Marcel reports that the “same species of happiness... poured into me” (218). This time it was associated with sensations of heat, woodsmoke, the image of a row of trees, the cool smell of a forest. The sound of the spoon had evoked and released the noise of a railwayman using a hammer to repair a train wheel during a stop in a little wood many years past. This brought with it a nexus of sensations from that slice of time now past: “I seemed to be in the railway carriage again, opening a bottle of beer” (219).

A short while later the butler gives him some orangeade. The napkin with which Marcel wipes his mouth releases another genie from the past, this time the happy feeling is accompanied by images of blue sky, promenade and high-tide, “for the napkin which I had used to wipe my mouth had precisely the same degree of stiffness and starchedness as the towel with which I had found it so awkward to dry my face as I stood in front of the window on the first day of my arrival at Balbec” (219). The images of an entire instant of Marcel’s past life unfolded into the present as if from the smooth surfaces and creases of the napkin, again making him swell with happiness.

The first lesson Marcel extracts from these experiences is the lesson of the vast difference between an actual impression of a thing during a real-time encounter compared with the artifice of any deliberate efforts to re-capture the past by using what he calls “deliberate” memory. This echoes a sustained message of the novel concerning the radical difference between our imagination of the future and our concrete real-time experiences of what actually happens. On one level, this is a difference between what Zitoun and Gillespie (2015) call proximal experience (e.g. experiences of real-time perception) and distal experience (experiences – like imagination – which imply a not yet actualized future and – like autobiographical memory – which imply a no longer actual past). Clearly in each of the cases Proust describes, the power of the experiences under consideration is inseparable from their involuntary nature. *A mémoire involuntaire* happens when we least expect and requires the mediation of a real physical sensation common to the present and the past. These involuntary memories were not the artifice of imagination but the actual instants themselves, intact and, it seems, just as they were felt in the past. They had nothing to do with the conscious efforts Marcel had previously made to deliberately recall to himself his impressions of Venice, Balbec or Combray. These relatively artificial forms of what Proust calls “undifferentiated” (220) memory in fact preserve *nothing* of life itself.

It is as if a concrete memory intact in its “vessel” from a given place and date in the past had escaped oblivion by somehow throwing a connecting link or bridge to the present moment. When such a bridge is constructed, we once again “breathe air” from the past, as it were, but that air, precisely because we had forgotten we had breathed it, would be experienced as the joy of *new* air. In

Proust's terms, we will have recovered Time that was Lost. This discovery of lost time gives us the seeds of a psychological (rather than transcendental) way of thinking of an experience which *resists* passing circumstance, and in so doing points immanently towards something like eternity.

The more demanding question remains as to why these experiences yield a joyful feeling of enduring value, a feeling of certainty, permanence and salvation which resuscitates the very appetite for life and which dispels anxiety and fear of death? Here we must observe that the notion shared in common by each of these remarkable experiences is not simply that they were moments from the past, but that in each case "I experienced them at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other" (222). In short, what these different experiences share in common is the identification of a *common notion* between past and present experience. The "being within" Marcel (for it had happened despite Marcel's conscious intentions) had extracted and enjoyed precisely what the two concrete proximal experiences shared in common. This common notion, it seems, is the source of a certain sense of the timelessness of value. As Proust points out, what is held in common between a day from the distant past and a present experience is, in a sense, more essential than either of them alone and must, in this very concrete and specific respect, be *extra-temporal*. By extension, the subject or "being within" that makes its appearance through or by way of its experience of this extra-temporal ground common to the past and the future must also be the subject of an object which is not reducible to any passing circumstance (in Whitehead's terms, it is the superject of an eternal object). As Proust puts it, such a subject experiences an object existing "in the one and only medium in which it could exist and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say: outside time" (223).

In short, Proust suggests that whatever identifies the present with the past thereby extracts a timeless value with an eternal or immortal quality capable of dispelling anxiety concerning temporal matters, including death. "This explained why it was that my anxiety on the subject of my death had ceased at the moment when I had unconsciously recognised the taste of the little madeleine, since the being which at that moment I had been was an extra-temporal being and therefore unalarmed by the vicissitudes of the future. This being had only come to me, only manifested itself outside of activity and immediate enjoyment, on those rare occasions when the miracle of an analogy had made me escape from the present. And only this being had the power to perform that task which had always defeated the efforts of my memory and my intellect, the power to make me rediscover days that were long past, the Time that was Lost" (223).









But, in an equally important sense, the integrative value at stake in these experiences is not simply outside the world of "activity and immediate enjoyment". The rare "miracle" of analogy was no simple escape from the present but precisely an integration of present and past – an integration that draws upon a liminal zone of indiscernibility and commonality between past and present, and between myself as I once was and myself as I am now. This integration permitted an unusual synthesis of imagination and sensation. Sensation is about the "proximal" here and now world of activity and the

immediate enjoyment of what is present. Imagination, by contrast, can only savour what is absent. Like voluntary memory, it introduces possibility into actuality, and thus uproots us from the being-there of grounded, proximal perception. Kierkegaard (1974: 163) notes this when he describes the imagination as “the medium of the process of infinitizing”.

As can be seen in table 1, in each of the experiences under consideration, the concrete sensations were at once present (the sound of the spoon, the feel of the stones in the courtyard, the starchy napkin, the madeleine in Paris) and past (the sound of the hammer, the stones of St Mark’s, the stiff towel, the Madeleine in Combray). This liminal simultaneity of past/present permits a temporary suspension of the typical rule whereby we are constrained only to imagine what is absent and only to sense what is present. In the rare context of these liminal experiences we are permitted to concretely sense what is absent (past / future) and to savour and enrich in the intensifying medium of our imagination what is present. Under these liminal conditions, the dreams of imagination acquire just that concrete existence they normally lack, whilst concrete experience acquires an encounter with an infinite immortality that can usually only be dreamed of. The sensation of the starchy towel from Balbec is real without being actual, whilst that of the napkin in Paris is ideal without being abstract³. The being that becomes what it is by way of this experience is thus given a rare opportunity: a momentary flash of exposure to what is almost never disclosed in ordinary life: “a fragment of time in the pure state” (224). But a lightening flash of freedom from the order of time is all that is required for this being to get a taste of the ambrosia of value. It will never lose this appetite, since this food brings the only true joy. The art of life is to have some of this enduring value in one’s temporal life.

³ One reviewer chastised me for my clumsy use of terms here, but I think the words are beautifully clear, and they are actually Proust’s, who writes “réels sans être actuels, idéaux sans être abstraits”. In fact Deleuze (1991) defines his key concept of the *virtual* using this very quotation from Proust, raising the question of why I have not pursued that concept here, especially since virtuality has been central to recent rethinking of social and cultural theory (Ansell-Pearson [2002] and Massumi [2002] both celebrate the virtual as a way of grasping the passage from indeterminate multiplicity to individuated actuality). Engaging with Bergson, Deleuze (1991) argues for pairing actuality with virtuality and *not* with possibility (which he takes to be the transcendent term contrasted with immanent ‘reality’). However, this terminological tradition does not fit easily with Kierkegaard or Whitehead, and in fact Proust himself did not use the phrase cited above to define ‘virtuality’. My concern is that the current fashionability of ‘the virtual’ can entrap one into conceptual debates which distract from the issue of *importance* that Proust was at pains to articulate: the experience of liminal simultaneity whereby a sensation from the past is experienced at the same time as a present sensation. Proust wants to explain the *value* of these experiences, and so the experience must be kept close and not replaced with intellectual discussion. He wants to justify *confidence* in the resulting *joy* (and fearlessness) “even if the simple taste of a madeleine does not seem logically contain within it the reasons for this joy” (225). This is not to deny the fecundity of a properly wrought virtual /actual distinction (see chapters 7 & 9 of Brown and Stenner, 2009). Indeed, I would thoroughly recommend thinking standards/values through Deleuze / Bergson, and suggest that William James’ concept of the virtual (whereby one portion of experience relates to and re-enters another portion of experience) might more directly accommodate Proust’s intent (see Stenner, 2011).

Table 1: Marcel Proust's value experiences described in terms of a liminal zone between distal and proximal experience.

Then - railway carriage		<i>Sound</i> Hammer / Spoon		Now - Paris
Then - Balbec		<i>Touch</i> Towel / Napkin		Now - Paris
Then - Combray		<i>Taste</i> Madeleine		Now - Paris
Then - Combray		<i>Equilibrioception</i> Paving stones		Now - Paris
DISTAL EXPERIENCE		Liminal zone of inter(re)ference		PROXIMAL EXPERIENCE
Included: The intensification ('savouring', 'enriching') of what is absent by way of imagination or 'deliberate' memory		'Involuntary' memory of the 'being within' which is both distal and proximal		Included: The sensing of what is present here and now
Excluded: What is present escapes intensification. The ideal remains abstract		Exclusions and inclusions are 'suspended', allowing a) the <i>sensing of what is absent</i> and b) the <i>intensification of what is present</i> . a) brings reality to what is not actual and b) brings ideality to what is not abstract.		Excluded: What is absent. The real remains concrete

Integrating finite actualities and infinite possibilities: The nature of the self according to Kierkegaard

In this section I suggest that Kierkegaard gives us an account of the nature of the human self that complements and can accommodate Proust's insights, allowing us to develop them further. He begins *The Sickness unto Death* by defining man as spirit and defining spirit as the self. Kierkegaard (1974) understands the human psyche to be a relation, and more specifically, as a relation which relates itself to its own self. Leaving the details aside, I want merely to point out that for Kierkegaard the self is a special kind of relation that involves the integration of what he calls the infinite and the finite. Infinity is associated with the concepts of possibility and freedom whilst finitude is associated with actuality and necessity. This distinction can be interpreted without mysticism, and indeed it functions similarly to Whitehead's worlds of value and activity.

Although these concepts may seem old fashioned, we should not rush too quickly to dismiss the contrast between the finite and infinite. If we know what something finite is, then we can contrast it with something infinite, as is routine

in mathematics. In a general sense we can say that something finite is something limited, whilst the infinite expands beyond those limits, culminating in the unlimited. For example, you may have a finite and concrete perceptual experience of the room you are now in (assuming you are in one). But you know that your understanding of this room is a partial and limited perspective. You can expand that perspective by taking into account the wider relations that it is part of – it might be part of a building, for instance, and this building might be in a city which is part of a country - like Denmark, which is in Europe which is on the surface of earth which is a planet in a solar system that is part of what we call the milky way and so on. Of course we are already going beyond our sense experience and using memory and imagination to exceed the here and now. We quickly grasp that our knowledge is limited, but that in some sense there is a real relationship between all these entities. The existence of each entity is relevant in some way to all the others. We are part of something bigger, but we only have a vague sense of that larger totality. So, there is finitude, but, as Whitehead (1948: 60) puts it, “any one finite perspective does not enable an entity to shake off its essential connection with totality. The infinite background always remains as the unanalyzed reason why that finite perspective of that entity has the special character that it does have”.

Our sense of value and importance is tied to the specific and limited aspects of the world we routinely engage with, and yet these values emerge and grow as part of a process whereby we become more aware of our relationship to a larger totality that ultimately must be grasped as infinite. To use a famous expression from Spinoza, we grow and progress to the extent that our capacities to *affect and be affected* by the world that we are part of are increased. So, the term ‘limitation’ signifies the “most general conception of finitude” (Whitehead, 1922/2007, p.16) and the concept of the infinite implies an open-ended or unlimited contrast with finitude.

Furthermore, as we encounter and exceed the limits of our finite knowledge and experience, so we enjoy a sense of our own *possibilities* which exceed the limits of what is *actual*. We thus encounter the equally important distinction between possibility and actuality. The greater our awareness that we participate in a totality beyond our limited horizon, the greater our possibilities for participating in that totality. Infinity thus does not exist transcendentally as a given, but emerges into experience along with a *self* capable of expanding its experience (relative to its necessarily limited starting point).

This is partly what Kierkegaard means when he writes of the self as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. He insists, for instance, that the self does not exist as a simple actuality. Or rather, as he puts it, “a self, every instant it exists, is in process of becoming” (163) – it is “only that which it is to become”. But if a self is to become itself, then it must become concrete – a concrete part of the world of activity. Kierkegaard insists that this process of becoming concrete “means neither to become finite nor infinite” but to synthesize the two in each and every experience. We need what he calls the *limiting factor* of the finite, but we also need the *expanding factor* of the infinite (163). To become itself, then, a self must weave together the finite and the infinite through processes of infinitizing and finitizing. That is to say, one must “move away from oneself infinitely by the

process of infinitizing onself, and in returning to oneself infinitely by the process of finitizing” (163).

If the self does not become itself in this way, then it falls into despair. That is why Kierkegaard insists that one can despair in two distinguishable ways. We can despair from lack of finitude or from lack of infinitude. Without the infinite we become stuck, as it were, in the finite. We become “desperately narrow minded and mean spirited”. We become a number instead of a self, just one more soulless and repetitive instrument of the need others have to keep the numbers up. This can happen, Kierkegaard suggests, when instead of finding our rough-edges polished by experience, we find ourselves instead ground completely smooth so that we get through life with no friction, imitating and play acting, but never daring to be ourselves⁴. We might be very successful in life because of this reluctance to venture ourselves and because of our preference for quiet obedience. But what use are finite worldly advantages if you have lost your self? Such people look selfish with their purely temporal concerns for accumulating wealth and esteem, but in fact they have no self “for which they could venture anything”.

But we can also suffer despair for lack of the finite, in which case we evaporate into the infinite. That is to say, without the limits imposed by the finite we can fall into a “fantastic existence in abstract endeavour”. We fall so easily into fantasy because of the powers of our imagination, imagination being the “medium of the process of infinitizing” (163). Through unchecked imagination, our feelings, our knowledge and our wills can become so fantastic and unworldly that we are carried so far away from ourselves that we cannot return. Our self is volatilized and comes to concern itself only with abstractions. For example, instead of loving concrete people we love abstract humanity whilst participating inhumanly in actual affairs. The self is squandered for inhuman abstractions.

Lost in the finite, we have no way of experiencing or envisaging our possible connection with the broader totality we are in fact part of. We don’t actually know what we are. Lost in the infinite, we volatilize ourselves in imaginary possibilities which never give us the satisfaction of becoming real and making a concrete difference, and hence we remain unreal, running wild in unactualized possibilities⁵. The ideal texture of one’s life can be viewed from this perspective as a textile woven from the warp of the finite and the weft of the infinite, and thus we return to an indivisible totality in which value has no meaning apart from reference to the world of passing fact which in turn has no meaning but for its participation in value.

⁴ The standardization associated with capitalism obviously encourages this conformity on the part of the workforce, and modern positivistic psychology has served for the most part as an instrument of this instrumentalization of human resources (see Canguilhem, 1958).

⁵ These two contrasting forms of despair map in turn onto the contrast between possibility and necessity. Kierkegaard (1974: 171) likens lack of possibility to being dumb: “Necessity is like a sequence of consonants only, but in order to utter them their must also be possibility”.

Conclusion

I have explored the relation between values and standards in a particular way that I associate with the approach of a psychology without foundations. I have suggested that standards are objectifications of values designed to generalize and stabilize experiences of value. I have also suggested that standards are prone to becoming parodic in the sense that they can become obstacles to the actualization of the values they were designed to incarnate. Furthermore, in a bodged effort to free value from standardization, much critical social science has insisted that values are nothing but local and specific constructions in the mundane world of human activity, and that the self is an illusion that can be reduced to neurophysiology in the context of an ensemble of social relations.

I have situated this dynamic between values and standards in relation to a broader theme of a certain weaving together of finite and concrete matters of fact with an expanding concern with broad and enduring forms of importance. The self, as defined by Kierkegaard, takes on a new importance and reality in this approach, since the self becomes itself through a process of concrescence in which the potential infinitude of the possible is integrated with the finite actual *in each and every occasion of its experience*. As Proust shows us, this weaving of the finite and the infinite is at the same time an integration of past, present and future on the part of a self or subject which emerges and coheres (and hence also dissolves and disperses) through these experiences. This self or subject is not a pre-given and self-contained individual, but a process of becoming that must always be socially actualized in a cultural context that is itself the living repository of objectifications of value. But this contingency should not lead to a depreciation of the value of the self, without which value as such is not only unthinkable, but cannot be realized.

I end by observing that the performative rejection of the standards of our culture that we see in much critical social science - this act of constant negation and refusal to admit anything general about values - is suggestively close to what Nietzsche called nihilism. The nihilist insists that there is nothing and that nothing can be known about it. This comes down to a refusal to will anything and a reluctance to be a subject or a self that actively modifies the events of the world from a principled standpoint in a concrete social system. In this sense, it comes down to despair in Kierkegaard's sense of the word. It suggests a refusal to show a preference whereby certain things are admitted and other things omitted, certain things accepted and other things rejected, certain things enjoyed with pleasure, others excluded with disgust. Perhaps it is a refusal to 'be' and hence a permanent suspension in the both/and impasse of 'to be *and* not to be' (Nissen, 2002):

... his goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air—look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors... (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2).

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