Three Ways of Talking about Value

If one reads a lot of anthropology, it is hard to escape the impression that theories of value are all the rage of late. One certainly sees references to “value” and “theories of value” all the time—usually thrown out in such a way as to suggest there is a vast and probably very complicated literature lying behind them. If one tries to track this literature down, however, one quickly runs into problems. In fact it is extremely difficult to find a systematic “theory of value” anywhere in the recent literature; and it usually turns out to be very difficult to figure out what body of theory, if any, that any particular author who uses the term “value” is drawing on. Sometimes, one suspects it is this very ambiguity that makes the term so attractive.

What I’d like to do in this chapter is offer some suggestions as to how this situation came about. I think it has something to do with the fact that anthropology has been caught in a kind of theoretical limbo. The great theoretical dilemmas of twenty years ago or so have never really been resolved; it’s more like they were shrugged off. There is a general feeling that a theory of value would have been just the thing to resolve most of those dilemmas, but such a theory never really materialized; hence, perhaps, the habit of so many scholars acting as if one actually did exist.

It will become easier to see why a theory of value should have seemed to hold such promise if one looks at the way the word “value” has been used in social theory in the past. There are, one might say, three large streams of thought that converge in the present term. These are:

1. “values” in the sociological sense: conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life
2. “value” in the economic sense: the degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them
3. “value” in the linguistic sense, which goes back to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), and might be most simply glossed as “meaningful difference.”

When anthropologists nowadays speak of “value”—particularly, when they refer to “value” in the singular when one writing twenty years ago would have spoken of “values” in the plural—they are at the very least implying that the fact that all these things should be called by the same word is no coincidence. That ultimately, these are all refractions of the same thing. But if one reflects on it at all, this is a very challenging notion. It would mean, for instance, that when we talk about the “meaning” of a word, and when we talk about the “meaning of life,” we are not talking about utterly different things. And that both have something in common with the sale-price of a refrigerator. Now, putting things this way raises obvious objections. A skeptic might reply: it may well be that all these concepts do have something in common, but if so, that “something” would have to be so utterly abstract and vague that pointing it out is simply meaningless. In which case the ambiguity really is the point. But I don’t think this is so. In fact, if one looks back over the history of anthropological thought on each of the three sorts of value mentioned above one finds that in almost every case, scholars trying to come up with a coherent theory of any one of them have ended up falling into terrible problems for lack of sufficient consideration of the other ones.

Let me give a brief sketch of these histories, one at a time:

I: Clyde Kluckhohn’s value project

The theoretical analysis of “values” or “systems of values” is largely confined to philosophy (where it is called “axiology”) and sociology (where it is what one is free from when one is “value-free.”) It is not as if anthropologists haven’t always used the term. One can pick up a work of anthropology from almost any period and, if one flips through long enough, be almost certain to find at least one or two casual references to “values.” But anthropologists rarely made much of an effort to define it, let alone to make the analysis of values a part of anthropological theory. The one great exception was during the late 1940s and early ‘50s, when Clyde Kluckhohn and a team of allied scholars at Harvard embarked on a major effort to place the issue of values at the center of anthropology. Kluckhohn’s project, in fact, was to redefine anthropology itself as the comparative study of values.

Nowadays, the project is mainly remembered because it managed to find its way into Talcott Parson’s General Theory of Action (Parsons and Shils 1951), meant as a kind of entente cordiale between sociology, anthropology, and psychology, which divided up the study of human behavior between...