TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METAETHICS

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ABSTRACT. Many metaethicists have all but aban­
donned the possibility that ordinary value language
has any sort of universal logic. But careful
phenomenological reflection indicates that we call
something "good" only if we tacitly believe that
it is disposed to be "pragmatically attractive" in
some way. Conversely, "bad" things must be "prag­
matically repellent". Linguistic and phenomeno­
logical evidence supports these observations.
Differences in the meanings of diverse value judg­
ments seem to be due to variations in the practi­
cal context in which the attraction or repulsion
is judged. The fact that we can legitimately re­
quest clarification regarding each of five practi­
cal dimensions tends to indicate that a common
structure underlies all senses in which something
can be said "good" or "bad."

Has linguistic metaethics been just a quixotic quest?
Time was when philosophers thought everyday value language
consistent and universal. But every attempt to find the
invariant function of terms like "good" and "bad"--a whole
fleet of "intuitionistic," "naturalistic" and "noncognitiv­
istic" theories--has foundered on the hard rock of criti­
cism. Today's writers are more inclined to see terms like
"good" and "bad" as either saddled with a multiplicity of
meanings only remotely related to one another[1] or else too
vague or ambiguous to allow for any analytical results at
all.[2]

But are the basic value terms, "good" and "bad," really
so slippery, so gelatinous as to dim all hope for an under­
lying logic? When someone tells us that Woody Allen's la­
test film is not as good as "Annie Hall," or that the steaks

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at a given restaurant are pretty bad, we believe we have a pretty good idea what is meant, even if we find putting it into words a problem. There must be some basis for understanding these statements, some set of communicative circumstances in each case that tips us off as to what particularly is meant. Those who tell us value language is messy do not say exactly how we are able to recognize exactly what is meant by specific sentences. There may merely be, as Searle insists, many different logics for different occasions. But the possibility of a common logic has never been refuted.[3]

A specialized phenomenological analysis suggests that there is, after all, a certain structured relationship among all evaluative predications of "good" and "bad." The method consists of reflecting on the way in which our focal attention behaves when we are conscious of those things we call "good" or "bad." I shall try to show that the specific way in which our attention is attracted to or repelled by certain things accounts for different senses in which they are understood to be "good" or "bad." There has never been a close phenomenological analysis of value language before.[4] The goal will be to combine phenomenology with careful analysis of the way in which we use our basic value terms.

I

The idea of applying phenomenology to ordinary language analysis isn't new. J.L. Austin once wrote,

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or "meanings," whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: We are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name than those given above ("ordinary language philosophy," "linguistic philosophy," "analytic philosophy")—for instance, "linguistic phenomenology," only that is rather a mouthful.[5]

Austin is suggesting that for linguistic analysis to be successful we must not only observe how a word functions in relation to other words; we should also examine very carefully what we are conscious of—the phenomena—at the moment we understand its usage. The closest writers in metaethics have come to this goal is to suggest variously that such obvious, undigested concepts as "pleasurable," "desirable," "object of interest" and the like are synonymous with "good." Each of these is easily negated by pointing out value judgments to which they obviously do not apply.[6] A
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much more sensitive method will therefore have to be employed to determine if any one phenomenon is consistently associated with this term.

What reason have we to believe that some special phenomenological method is able to detect what careful linguistic analysis could not? It will be argued that the phenomena to which "good" and "bad" refer are instances of what Michael Polanyi has called "tacit knowledge."[7] Polanyi explains tacit knowledge in terms of attention. Consider the example of physiognomy. We can usually read a person's mood from his facial expression, but our knowledge of human physiognomy is often merely tacit in that we are unable to explain how we detect its meanings. That is because our attention moves too quickly from the expressive facial clues to their emotional meanings to register the specific character of those clues; we "disattend" from one to the other. Polanyi cites experimental evidence which indicates that tacit knowledge of various kinds can be gained through extremely subtle signs.[8]

The thesis to be defended here is that our criteria for recognizing what is "good" or "bad" are tacit in this way because they are inherent in the very manner in which our attention itself responds to the item judged. Attention spontaneously gravitates toward "good" things and retreats from "bad" things, but that requires that we be mainly preoccupied with the objects of these attractions and aversions. The activity itself we simply "read" for its significance without specifically noting its character. Only deliberate phenomenological reflection is able to make attention explicit.

I shall call the appropriate mode of analysis "micro-phenomenology," to distinguish it from other, more traditional, modes of phenomenology. Like Husserl's phenomenology, it represents an attempt to describe, not "interpret," what goes on in experience. Unlike any other phenomenological method, however, it tries to piece together the swift and subtle operations of attention rather than the traditionally analyzed structure of intention. The first order of business then, is to explain what is meant by "attention" here.

French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty has made out a strong case against the standard conception of attention as some sort of mental "searchlight" that elucidates certain preformed, pre-existing entities "in" the mind, construed as either the "sense data" of the empiricists or the "ideas" of the rationalists.[9] This view of attention, he argues, falsely presupposes a "constancy hypothesis" that the contents of experience are present whether attended to or not. Prior to any attention paid it, a background phenomenon is simply "indeterminate," totally void of any explicit characteristics such as shape or color.[10] Attention,
he observes, does not merely illuminate the determinate objects of experience, but creates them by articulating indeterminate data into figures against a ground. Instead of a searchlight, then, attention is a process by which phenomenal figures are articulated.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of the "searchlight" conception of attention bears up under reflective scrutiny. Experimentation with the face-vase or the ambiguous (Necker) cube illusions will demonstrate to anyone who takes the trouble that how one attends to the data determines the sorts of figures that emerge; no specific figure exists prior to our attending to it carefully. When we look further into the attentive process, however, we find that it can also function as pure "illumination." One can, for example, "concentrate" one's attention in the middle of a solidly-colored wall without delineating a distinct pattern. The concentrated area merely becomes "brighter," or, what amounts to the same thing, more apparent, fading boundlessly in every direction from the focal center. Relative intensification, not the articulation of figures, therefore appears to be the more fundamental function of attention. A figure, when examined reflectively, turns out only to be that portion of the phenomenal field which is distinguishable from the remainder of the field by the sharp contrast of its heightened phenomenal intensity. The more one attentively intensifies a pattern against its ground, the more it stands out as a figure, while with diminishing attention it gradually bleeds back into the background. Attention is therefore neither the mere intensification of the field (as the traditionalists thought) nor the mere articulation of the field (as Merleau-Ponty insists). It shows itself to be the very dynamics of phenomenal emergence, by which I mean the delineative manner in which phenomena continuously appear and disappear with contrastive degrees of intensity, whether sensory or imaginary, concrete or abstract, spontaneous or deliberate. It is, in this sense, a focusing process.

Four focusing factors of attention are isolable: (1) Attention, as I mentioned, determines the degree to which phenomena are intensified or reduced in appearance, i.e., the extent to which they are apparent. (2) The relative difference in this intensity between figure and ground determines, in turn, varying degrees of figural prominence, the extent to which a pattern "stands out." (3) In addition, the extent to which relative intensification of elements in the field (discrimination) progresses specifies the amount of detail with which phenomena emerge. The longer one actively attends to anything the more specific it becomes. (4) Lastly, the expansion or contraction of the scope of that discriminating activity determines how much of what is present in experience is delineated. Discrimination can zoom in and isolate a small portion of the phenomenal field or expand to include its entirety. We shall find that
all four of these factors come into play in the phenomena I call motive attraction and repulsion, the key factors in value concepts.

II

These are the definitions I wish to defend: to say that anything is "good" is to say, at least tacitly, that it is **motively attractive in a specifiable pragmatic context**. Conversely, anything "bad" would be anything **motively repellant in a specifiable pragmatic context**. There are two necessary definitional conditions here for either value term, (a) that of **motive attraction or repulsion** and (b) that of a **specifiable pragmatic context**, which taken together are sufficient. The first of these conditions, motive attraction and repulsion, refer respectively to the opposed spontaneous tendencies of attention to gravitate toward or to withdraw from some object of experience. The second condition, the specifiable pragmatic context, allows for different senses in which things can be "good" or "bad," depending on the practical circumstances in which they are judged. This section will consider only the first of these definitional conditions.

The attraction and repulsion to which I refer are principles of attention, but I call them **motive attraction and repulsion** because of their intimate association with motivation. They are clearly able to trigger both feeling sensations and behavior. In itself, motive attraction to anything, whether present or imagined, is simply the spontaneous discrimination of it in a heightened, persistent fashion. Motive repulsion in itself is also just the spontaneous tendency of attentive focus to move away to something else, sometimes with alacrity, leaving the repellent object itself relatively undiscriminated, if apparent at all. Whether these attentive events are accompanied by bodily events depends on a number of conditions. Feelings of tension and excitement seem to arise only when focal excitation reaches a certain degree. For example, the sight of a daisy may be only mildly attractive and elicit no feelings whereas the greater appeal of a panoramic sunset may "fill" us with feeling. Conversely, the attentive repulsiveness of static on the radio must reach a certain point before we feel the annoyance.

It is also apparent that under certain conditions motive attraction and repulsion will elicit behavior. When attracted to a sunset, for example, one may find oneself craning one's neck to get a better look. To perpetuate an appealing flavor we will automatically chew and swallow. And to bring out a fascinating personality one may find oneself spontaneously pursuing a conversation. Conversely, one often averts one's eyes at the sight of something repellent. Examples such as these demonstrate that attentive principles
play a pivotal role in motivation, i.e., in inducing action. It is for this reason, I believe, that we consult our attentive propensities in order to make value judgments, since we make value judgments in order to choose a course of action, if action is possible.

That does not mean, however, that to find something attractive or repellent is necessarily to be motivated in some way. Unlike contemporary empirical psychology, microphenomenology does not claim that judgments of value entail motivation on the part of the agent. Reflection shows that attraction or repulsion is only a necessary condition for being motivated to do something. Other factors include (a) a belief that one is able to act and (b) the absence of other, stronger attractions or repulsions. Moreover, we often evaluate things without any thought of our own involvement, such as when we judge the actions of another. Thus this analysis allows for "detached" evaluation.

If being attracted to something is our tacit clue to its being good, the quality attributed to the object itself would have to be a disposition to attract. Clearly no one uses "good" only on those occasions when it is actually attracting; values have a certain "permanence" to them. If a given phenomenon consistently gives rise to spontaneous discrimination whenever it swims into view, we automatically attribute to that object a certain capacity to elicit the attraction. Considered unreflectively, this disposition may appear a sort of independent "magnetic" power, as Nicholai Hartmann once described it. The beautiful object, for instance, strikes us impressionistically as possessing a certain ability to draw us to it. As through the pane of a window, we look right through our own tacit phenomenal dynamics at a world of things seemingly possessed of "magnetic" properties. But attractiveness, and therefore goodness itself, proves, on closer inspection, merely a constituted property, a projection of the potentiality to induce motivation which translates into our implicit anticipation of attraction whenever confronted with the object.

Defending the first condition of the definitions requires close analysis of the attentive phenomena in terms of the four described dimensions in which attention can vary--intensity, prominence, detail and scope. Reflection discloses that motive attraction is characterized to some degree by (a) an increment in the intensity of sensory or imagined qualities, (b) a greater prominence of the object against whatever ground of experience there is for it, (c) a heightening of textural detail within the figure, and (d) a "zoom" effect, in which the scope of articulated phenomena collapses inward on the object. All these alterations are the manifestation of an accelerated, sustained discrimination of the object. If, to take an obvious instance, one should be very hungry, the sight of a crisp summer salad in a restaurant would tend, quite independently of any inten-
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tion on one's part, (a) to become phenomenally "brighter" than other things, (b) to stand our strongly against everything else in view, (c) to be much more detailed than anything else, with bits of bacon, cheese, and shrimp very much in evidence, and (d) even to appear a bit "larger" than it ordinarily would, in having swollen to monopolize the entire explicit phenomenal field. Correspondingly, anything repel­lent, if attention fails to withdraw from it altogether, would tend (a) to darken, (b) to recede, (c) to grow vague or coarse, and (d) to diminish in stature.

These effects are often difficult to detect, but ordinary language offers dramatic evidence in support of the claim that they are in fact what we are reading when we judge anything "good" or "bad." Many languages are rife with value synonyms which also happen to describe the four categories of attentional variation described above:

(1) **Intensity:** Many value expressions reflect the observation that heightened attention "brightens" its object while withdrawal of attention results in a "darkening." Good things are often said to be "glorious" or "splendid," which terms connote an inner illumination. The future is said to look "bright" or even "brilliant" if it "looks good." By contrast it is said to be "dark," "dingy," "bleak," or even "black," if bad. Things are also said to "fade" or "pale" in comparison with better alternatives.

(2) **Heightened figure-ground relation:** At least two value terms reflect the fact that increased attention brings phenomena forward relative to the ground: "outstanding" and "prominent." There seem to be no corresponding negative synonyms, but a figure without some prominence would not appear at all.

(3) **Texture:** Through heightened discrimination details become much more evident. There are such positive slang terms as "nice," "neat," "fine," and "keen." And the lack of detail attributable to repellent items is indicated by value terms like "gross," "coarse," "crude," and "indelicate."

(4) **Scope:** When we are attracted to something, the reduction in the scope of discriminating activity increases its apparent or phenomenal size because it occupies more of the determinate extension of the phenomenal field. Food, as they say, looks "larger" to a starving man. All sorts of value terms designate this increment in phenomenal size: "great," "grand," "colossal," "super," "tremendous," "magnificent," and most insightfully, "swell." "Little" and "small" are, on the other hand, used to refer to a relative lack of positive value.

All such substitutions appear to be metonymous references to partial manifestations of the total event intro-
duced into the language by unusually perceptive speakers and writers. Though there are other value synonyms like "terrific," "wonderful," and "cool," the pattern of words conforming to our microphenomenological description is too exact and too redundant to be the result of accidental associations, as these other terms seem to be. The total linguistic cluster can only be indicative of a heightened, spontaneous discrimination of "good" things and a partial withdrawal of attention from "bad" things. The fact that these references are used a synonyms would seem to show that they are the usually-tacit criteria for recognizing values.

However, two observations must be made to head off possible objections:

(1) Motive attraction and repulsion must not be con-founded with other, similar principles of attention. Loud sounds, bright colors and stabbing sensations may grab our attention, but this is mere sensuous attraction; it differs from motive attraction in that it does not motivate and does not engage a truly discriminating activity; it often actually finds itself in a tug-of-war with motive repulsion, as when a "piercing" sound imposes itself on a consciousness frantically seeking escape. Subtle differences must also be noted between motive attention and other similar principles: hypnotic attention, for example, does not motivate; de-liberate attention is not spontaneous; both so-called "spontaneous" attention (the tendency to focus whatever is different from the rest of the field) and associative attention (Polanyi's "disattending") are not persistent and do not motivate.

(2) A distinction must be made between direct and indirect value judgements. The fact that we sometimes call something to which we are never attracted "good" is not in itself a refutation of the proposed definition because it is possible to refer indirectly to something as good. In this, the quality of goodness is no different than the color red. One can decide that Mars is red without ever having seen it, and one can judge an action good without experiencing an attraction. Indirect judgments regarding any property can be made through induction, deduction or hearsay. All that is meant by "good," I am claiming, is that the object will be found attractive under certain specifiable contextual conditions.

III

As has been said, mere attractiveness and repulsiveness are not by themselves sufficient to characterize anything as "good" or "bad." To qualify, an item must be attractive or repellent in some specifiable pragmatic context. What I mean by "pragmatic context" can be more easily understood if we contrast it with another sort of context, the "aesthetic-
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ic." Aestheticians have for some time distinguished a certain "aesthetic attitude" from the so-called "practical attitude."[14] The practical attitude is said to be a mental set geared to noticing cause and effect relations, the pragmatic interconnectedness of things, whereas the aesthetic attitude "isolates" an object from all such memories and anticipations, contemplating only the sheer look or sound of things, as when the sea at dusk is reduced to swirling gray shapes, hisses, and roars. The object becomes "practical" only when imagination has woven it into a sequence of probable events, as when the sea scene is transformed into waves pounding viciously against the rocks with the tide rising and night coming on.

Now my point is that an aesthetically viewed seascape or sunset, no matter how attractive, is not the sort of phenomenon to which "good" properly applies. The appropriate terminology for aesthetic attractiveness are terms like "beautiful," "lovely," "gorgeous," or at least "interesting." R.M. Hare was thus close to the mark when he observed, "We should not speak of good sunsets unless the decision has been made, whether to go to the window to look at the sunset."[15] It is only when we entertain the actual coming-to-be or remaining-in-existence of a possible or actual state of affairs that the question of value even arises. The looking-out-the-window-at-the-sunset is what would be called "good" (or a "good idea") if its realization were found attractive. In the same way an old spare tire, though hardly beautiful, can be quite attractive to someone confronted with a flat on a lonely road.

The pragmatic orientation must also be distinguished from another viewpoint, the inquisitive, which unlike the aesthetic is not limited to what is immediately present in experience, but like the aesthetic is not concerned with the coming-into-existence of its object. Attraction from this point of view is called "curiosity" and appears to be stimulated by novelty. It is possible to be inquisitively attracted to something that is otherwise repellent pragmatically. Our "morbid" curiosity at bad accidents, for example, finds itself at war with our practical revulsion at the loss of life. Again, a bear encountered in the woods arouses such interest that it may momentarily loom larger than life, every detail of its body standing out in bold relief, before practical imagination screams off in pursuit of an avenue of escape. In neither of these cases of non-practical curiosity would we call the objects of the attraction "good."

It is important to note, then, that the practical attitude modifies the activity of attention, making it imaginatively sequential. Attention is attracted or repelled through causal channels of imagined events probabilistically leading toward attractive entelechies or away from repellent circumstances. That seems to be how instrumentally "good"
things come to be attractive; on its way along a conative continuum to an attractive "end," or away from a repellent alternative, attention is attracted to and through those items that serve as the means. The spare tire brightens to the hapless motorist because his attention is leaping from the flat tire predicament to the attractive thought of escape by means of replacing it with the spare. Each link becomes attractive in relation to the one preceding it, as attention accelerates its discrimination in the direction of the goal.

When we make a value judgment of anything, then, we regard it in terms of "reality." We disengage our habitual interaction with the world and implicitly ask, what if such-and-such came to be? By principles of association and probability the item is thus envisioned in its likely relationships with other probable events. The complexity of the resulting pattern will of course vary according to the amount of experience and imaginative skill of which the agent is capable. But in any case what we are tacitly testing under these conditions is the attractiveness or repellency of the item in question, given its interaction with the other factors in the picture. Repellent consequences or a repugnant means can thus dampen a thing's initial attractiveness, just as attractive consequences can brighten an otherwise drab activity. The resultant attentive valence is what we understand to be its value in that context.

However, the practical contexts in which we evaluate things obviously are systematically variable. Whether an item appears attractive or repellent depends on the specific sort of circumstances in which it is regarded. The same things can thus be good in one sense and bad in another. At least five "directions" can be found in which the context of an evaluative judgment can be intentionally altered, making for different senses of the words "good" and "bad":

1) **Mode.** Different principles and different attitudes make for differences in what we are attracted to or repelled by. The resulting modes of motivation include the aesthetic, the theoretical, the religious, the egoistic, the moral, and others. When something attractive is pronounced good, the mode has to be part of what is meant, since the self-same item may be unattractive or even repellent in another mode. The Nazi propaganda film, "Triumph of Will," may be aesthetically good but morally bad, for instance.

2) **Temporal range.** It is just as obvious that how far into the future one regards an item is also a factor in its judged value. For instance, complete abandonment to the pleasures of the senses may appear attractive in the short run but perhaps not over the long haul. The sensuous life was good to the Cyrenaics because they only considered it in the short run; the Epicureans found it bad in an entirely different sense when they contemplated it over the long
These observations are actually not incompatible because they were meant in different contexts.

(3) Again, we obviously distinguish what is good as a means from what is good as an end, as demonstrated by the fact that some items, like medicine, are attractive only in reference to that to which they conduce, while others, like a night at the theatre, can be attractive without relevance to anything beyond themselves. Since some things can be "good" in themselves but "bad" instrumentally, and vice versa, these differences must also enter into our meaning.

(4) The basis of comparison can make a definite difference in the degree of attraction or repulsion. It can be a "touchstone," an average, or an ideal. When we judge the efforts of a student pianist, for instance, we may say that while her playing is "good" compared with other students, it is "not so good" compared to Horowitz or Rubenstein, "pal ing" in comparison. At least some of the time, then, some basis of comparison is part of the sense in which an item is "good" or "bad."

(5) Affective extension has to do with the particular individuals to whom the item is judged to be attractive or repellent. When one says that hot apple pie is good, one could mean that its attraction is universal, i.e., capable of affecting anyone who tries it, or one could mean that its appeal is particular, relating only to oneself or another individual or perhaps some community of taste. Intuitively, it is not illegitimate to challenge a value claim with a demand for specification as to whether it was meant in a universal or a particular sense.

To say that there are different senses of "good" and "bad," then, is only to say that these terms are capable of a variety of meanings systematically variable in the essential directions in which pragmatic contexts may be altered by the individual making the judgment. The completely specific predication of "good" or "bad" must therefore include all five factors. Ordinarily the full meaning a value judgment is verbally implicit in virtue of the communicative circumstances in which it is uttered or written. But whether explicit or not the context is always specifiable, as evidenced by the intuitive legitimacy of being able to ask of any value judgment, "In what sense is it good (or bad)?) It is not unreasonable to require the speaker to clarify his judgment with regard to each of the five pragmatic directions. Our second necessary condition for "good" and "bad" is thus defensible on two counts: 1) the context in which something is considered determines whether one finds it good (or bad), and 2) if we do not know the context a speaker has in mind, we cannot know exactly what he means by terming something "good" or "bad."

This is not to say, however, that all values are in
some sense equal. Intuitively we find certain values over­
riding others. When compared, long range values tend to
supercede short run goods; moral values take precedence over
egoistic ones. The principle operative here seems to be one
of comprehensiveness. The larger picture seems to put the
narrower one "into perspective." The short-run or strictly
egoistic context appears incomplete in comparison to a more
comprehensive viewpoint. Hence, the person who evaluates a
possibility first in a limited context and then in a more
comprehensive one is likely to favor the values inherent in
the latter over the former because it subsumes it.

But the fact that there is a principle of comprehen­
siveness in no way invalidates the claim that there are many
different senses of "good" rather than a single meaning, as
some have claimed.[17] The final determinant of the meaning
of a term is the way people actually use it. Clearly we do
not use "good" and "bad" as though the most comprehensive
context determined its only meaning: (1) If comprehensiveness
were always meant, few value judgments could ever be
verified since the possible consequences of what is judged
could easily reverberate far beyond our own lifespans. In
practice we seldom, if ever, leave the confirmation of a
value judgment open for anywhere near so long. (2) If the
one-meaning theory were true, there could be no such thing
as value conflicts. If, for instance, the wife thinks brown
looks good in the living room but the husband thinks green
does, one or both would have to be wrong. To most it would
be clear that they just had different taste. (3) Another
consequence of the monistic position would be that all val­
ues would end up being ethical, or perhaps religious, de­
dpending on whichever is understood to be ultimate. But the
goodness of the taste of lobster, a mathematical proof, or
an oboe cadenza has no demonstrable connection with moral or
religious values. In fact many of our value conflicts seem
to be between moral or religious values and other sorts. It
seems, then, that any factor that makes a difference in the
attractiveness or repulsiveness of something can be part of
what is meant in a value judgment.[18]

But why should these claims about motive attraction and
repulsion be taken seriously? Contemporary empirical psy­
chology has, in fact, no place to put such "introspective"
goings on. Indeed, the "classical" psychological approach,
while agreeing that subjective reports may be given some
consideration, continues to interpret motivation, affection
and values in terms of dispositions to behave in certain
ways. This tradition, which includes such metaethical writ­
ers as Ralph Barton Perry,[19] Stephen Pepper,[20] and, most
recently, Richard Brandt,[21] must be challenged if our ob­
servations are to be vindicated. Taking Brandt's A Theory
of the Good and the Right as the "state of the art" of this
rival theory to our own, we need to determine (a) whether microphenomenology can answer Brandt's objections to the phenomenological approach, and (b) whether empiricist psychology is able to give a consistent account of values without recourse to the description of experience attainable only by microphenomenology.

What are Brandt's arguments against doing a phenomenology of values? The objections he raises do not directly address the possibility of experiencing value, but his arguments against considering motivation as a phenomenological object apply to our analysis of value as well. Brandt contends that all such concepts must be pure theoretical constructs.[22] For one thing, if motivation were exactly what the agent experienced, we should then understand our own motives much better than we actually do. There is even evidence for unconscious motivation.[23] Since motivation is seldom actually experienced, Brandt concludes, it can only be treated as a disposition to behave in certain ways.

Let us consider how this argument affects our analysis of value. We must agree on the basis of experience that people do not always understand what their actual motives or values are. Often they are "unconscious" in the sense that we cannot explain why we do certain things. But to conclude that these facts controvert our phenomenological analysis would require the false assumption that for anything to be a conscious event we must be conscious of it. While the dynamics of attention are conscious events, to be conscious of them we must reflect on them. Normally we are only tacitly aware of these dynamics, which is to say that our reflective awareness of them is merely marginal. But patterns of attraction and repulsion can certainly continue to occur without even tacit awareness of them. Sometimes this will happen because our own motives are repellent to us; that is when we need a psychoanalyst. But this inability to understand our own motives or values in no way refutes the claim that they are basically the attentive dispositions I have described.

Brandt's other argument against identifying motivational concepts with what can be discovered phenomenologically has to do with the intensity of the phenomena and their incompatibility with their actual "valence," i.e., the degree to which we are disposed to act on behalf of them.

It is doubtful whether introspection reveals these experiences to vary in intensity with the known intensity of the corresponding valences. At least we are sometimes surprised to find, after making a decision to forego a certain outcome, how deeply disappointed we are at the loss.[24]

Brandt seems to feel that if "wanting" referred to what we experience, the intensity of the experienced indicator (the
feeling or "glow" as Brandt calls it), would be the same as that of the motivation itself. The same argument could be made about the intensity of our experience of a value and what we know the intensity of the value to be.

But this seems a particularly confused argument. First of all, the idea of intensity is clearly applicable to either feeling or motive attraction, but how is it possible to talk about the "intensity" of behavior dispositions. Even if that matter could be clarified the argument falsely assumes that we judge our motives or our values according to some absolute phenomenal intensity of some sort. A little "introspection" will show that it is the relative attractiveness or repulsiveness by which we judge values. As a disposition to elicit our attention, value is "put into perspective" through acts of comparison. For example, one may presently have a very strong attraction to a certain course of action. But comparing it to others or considering it in a more comprehensive context can change its relative intensity. If we are disappointed with something which attracted us far more greatly in the anticipation it is only because the context in which it was considered was not sufficiently realistic. The thing's actualization determines its true worth, according to our phenomenological hypothesis.

While Brandt's arguments fail to dent the phenomenological approach, the neobehavioral psychology he champions is itself subject to grave doubts. The key concept in his empiricist psychology is "valence," which serves the same function in his theory that the phenomena of motive attraction and repulsion do in our phenomenological theory; it is understood to indicate the presence of that which is worthy of choice, with the proviso that one has considered the matter rationally.[25] He basically defines it thus:

We shall therefore say that a person "wants" something 0, or that something 0 "is valenced for" him at the time, if his central motive state is such that if it were then to occur to him that a certain act of his then would tend to bring 0 about, his tendency to perform that act would be increased.[26]

Two critical questions can be raised to the idea that the key ingredient of value could be simply a behavioral disposition.

(1) A charge frequently levied at behavioral theories of motivation and value is that they cannot explain how we know when we want or value something without observing our own behavior or waiting to see what our behavior will be when the object in question is realized.[27] How could one tell, for instance, that one had a disposition to go to Europe if one had never before made a physical effort to get there. Brandt's own reply to this objection is to suggest
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the possibility that we know when we want something in such cases because we have been conditioned to say. "I want that . . . ." whenever in fact we want something.[28] But this suggestion, upon which Brandt does not elaborate, rests on a highly dubious psychological theory. It makes references to motivation into a kind of reflex language, i.e., language that simply happens to an agent without any thought of using it. But not even emotive language is pure reflex action. To be a pure reflex, an action has to occur without any prior experience, such as withdrawing one's hand before the heat of a pan is felt. We say "Ouch!" only after we have felt the pain, however. If meaningless emotive terms like "Ouch!" have no hidden stimuli, how much more implausible it is to expect that meaningful propositions like "I want this" or "I value that" would have them. Therefore, Brandt has failed to show how it is possible for us to know what we want or value without knowledge of our probable behavior.

(2) Even more difficult to explain for the behavior-disposition theory are those cases in which noninferential value judgments exclude the possibility of personal action. Consider the class of judgments that includes "good day," "good weather," and "good luck." No behavior is possible in relation to these value judgments. "Good luck" even precludes behavior by definition. Only some phenomenal factor could tell us such things are "good."

V

But if values are indicated "internally," that does not in itself implicate motive attraction and repulsion. Many writers have concluded that we are acquainted with our wants and our values by feeling them. Edmund Husserl, for example, regards values as the intentional correlate of certain "feeling acts."[29] This possibility must also be eliminated.

The fact that our feelings often play a role in judging values is not denied. We frequently say, in fact, that we "feel" that something is good or bad, right or wrong. But we must ask how feelings are used in this way. If one reflects very carefully on the part feeling plays in value judgments, one will find that the sensations we call our feelings about the things judged are subsidiary to and dependent upon the attentive activities elicited by the judged object. My counter thesis to Husserl, then, is that motive attraction or repulsion of a high degree invariably triggers a higher degree of visceral and kinesthetic sensations than is usually found in the feeling background. These sensations themselves become attractive or repellent in virtue of their close association with the stimulus by "conduction," a principle I shall subsequently explain. Thus, according to this analysis, it is not the raw feeling sensation by which we judge the worth of something but the derivative attrac-
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tiveness or repellency of that feeling.

This claim has experimental support. In an all-but-forgotten study conducted by J.P. Nafe in 1924[30] and subsequently replicated,[31] certain subjects were exposed to mild stimuli like flavors and pin pricks and asked to describe the resulting "pleasantness" or "unpleasantness." Although untrained in phenomenological reflection, the subjects gave detailed descriptions which varied somewhat, but all of them volunteered, independently, pleasantness is a "bright pressure" while unpleasantness is a "dull pressure."

Nafe's untrained subjects can therefore be understood as making indirect references to attentive activity. Though the "pressure" to which they referred seems to be just a description of the feeling sensation itself, the "brightness" and "dullness" would seem to be degrees of attentive intensity. Moreover, Nafe's observers also described pleasure as "sparkling," "dancing," and "shimmering," an observation consistent with another manifestation of attraction, a rapidly moving focus of discriminating attention. They also depicted pleasure as "welling" and "spreading," a phenomenal expansion attributable to the zoom effect. Predictably, displeasure was seen as "somehow smaller than" pleasure. Unpleasantness was also variously called "dull," "drab," "somber," "gloomy," "less lively," and "rough," further manifestations of the diminishment of discriminating attention to the feeling. Though Nafe apparently had no notion of motive attraction and repulsion, his results are indirect indications that pleasure is a feeling consciousness tends to embrace, and displeasure is a feeling it flees.

VI

As an alternative to classical psychology, microphenomenology must be able to account for the origin of our values. Classical psychologists, of course, have recourse to the concept of the conditioning of behavior to explain how we have acquired our values. But microphenomenology must show how focal attractions and repulsion could themselves be conditioned. A brief description and defense of the principles by which we seem to develop new focal attractions and repulsions will show it is possible for microphenomenology to explain our present values.

On the basis of infant behavior, we may infer that certain rudimentary propensities to motive attraction and repulsion are inherited. All of these are related to survival in some way. Infants exhibit agitation and crying under such conditions as hunger, sudden loud sounds and sudden changes in position.[32] They also appear to have an aversion to salty, bitter, or sour tastes, extremes of cold or heat and, of course, slapping, spanking, pricking or pinch-
On the other hand, infants respond positively to the taste of milk and sweet solutions, as well as to patting, rocking, warmth, snug holding and anything they can suck on. Among other responses, it has been determined that shortly after sight develops, infants exhibit a visual fascination for complexity.

All other values would have to be "learned," as classical psychologists suggest. Somehow the patterns of attraction and repulsion with which we are born would have to be communicated to previously "neutral" stimuli in such a way as to create all of the complicated values of adulthood. A pair of related principles, "convection" and "conduction," seem to account for the conditioning of values. Convection, as the term is meant metaphorically to imply, is the evident spreading or "spilling over" of focal excitation beyond the stimulus to whatever is co-present with it in the phenomenal field. If an item attracts greatly, its immediate surroundings become quickly involved in the attraction, no matter how incidental they are to the occurrence of the stimulus. Everyone can recall that on days in which something magnificent has happened, one's whole day "brightens." To take another example, articles of clothing become all the more beautiful when worn by someone who is very appealing. Conversely, when something bad happens everything becomes "gloomy." (Why else do movie funerals always take place in the rain?) These ordinary examples demonstrate how either attraction or repulsion can be communicated throughout the phenomenal field. A direct correlation is apparent: The greater the initial stimulation the greater the convective influence.

"Conduction" is to be understood as the convection of attentive stimulation through channels of association, more like the passage of energy through conduits than free movement through the phenomenal "atmosphere." Anything associated with an attractive object becomes itself attractive to a degree commensurate with the intensity of the initial attractiveness. A token from one's love, for example, need not be co-present with the lover in order for it to "bask in a borrowed glory," as the trite-but-true expression goes. Instead, the gift brings to mind the thought of the lover by association. That thought can stimulate an attraction strong enough to affect the gift itself through the associative connection, making it far more attractive than it would otherwise have been. On the other side of the coin, if one hates or fears another person, everything that reminds one of that individual becomes itself somewhat repulsive. It would be interesting to speculate on the underlying brain events which correspond to convection and conduction, but physiological evidence is not necessary to establish the fact that conduction is a principle by which motive attractiveness and repulsiveness are communicated from one phenomenon to another. Experience is full of obvious examples of these principles.
It is a plausible and defensible hypothesis, then, to hold that all the values one presently finds have been the result of conduction through the incredibly elaborate system of associations that constitute what we understand as our world. Means become attractive in virtue of their association with attractive ends. Why else is money so attractive except by its association with so many things it can buy? The more a phenomenon has been associated with an attractive stimulus the more it becomes an attracting stimulus itself, though it never seems to lose its dependency on the initial stimulus. For instance, a miser's interest in his money would not persist if the bottom dropped out of the market. All the focal propensities acquired from babyhood would seem to be tied to a handful of genetically programmed responses through an intricate network of associations.

But, of course, the crucial question for metaethics is, What can microphenomenology tell us about moral values? We earlier identified them as belonging to a specific "mode" of values. But exactly what is this mode and how is it learned? It must at least be shown that microphenomenology is equipped to explain the etiology of moral values.

People do not always mean the same thing by "moral values." Sometimes they mean what might more accurately be called "morel values," the socially accepted values with which they have been conditioned through reward and punishment. At other times they refer indirectly to values believed held by an authority figure or group. On still other occasions purely egocentric values are meant. But the values for which a partial explanation will be offered here are those distinguished by the following characteristics: (1) They are universal in the sense that they take into consideration all interests, not just those of the agent or just those of others. (2) They apply only to the deliberate actions of individuals, or to the virtues from which those actions spring or to the persons who perform those actions. (3) The actions in question must be aimed at bringing about the resolution of some conflict of interests among two or more individuals. (4) They must be "rationally" related to the resolution; i.e., they must be an efficient and probable means of effecting that resolution. Granted, most "deontological" ethicists would not accept the last two conditions. But these conditions seem to be compatible with the values to which most "teleological" ethicists subscribe. It is necessary, at this point, only to show that microphenomenology is able to make sense of the values acknowledged at least by some writers to belong to the ethical sphere.

One promising way for microphenomenology to account for values that conform to the aforementioned conditions is in terms of a certain mental set traditionally called the "moral point of view." Only by "climbing out" of our personal
involvement with the world and viewing it alternately from multiple points of view does it seem we could attain the universality required of moral value. Kurt Baier has described the moral point of view as the attitude of "an independent, unbiased, impartial, objective, dispassionate, disinterested judge," a "God's-eye point of view."[37] Baier points out that we get children to adopt the moral point of view by getting them to put themselves in another's place. Thus the attitude is not unlike that of a thoughtful reader who takes the part of all the characters in a well written novel. But when we do this conflicts between parties manifest themselves as a conflict within our own phenomenal field. The resolution to this conflict is thus found attractive as the means of reducing a repellent conflict. Those actions that solve the conflict are thus viewed as morally good. At least we have here the rudiments of a microphenomenological account of moral values as described above.

VIII

Even if everything that has been said here about the psychology of evaluation were true, it is still quite possible that the ordinary meanings of "good" and "bad" do not conform to it. All language has been subject to misapplication, misunderstandings and legitimate extensions beyond its original limits. Writers like Wittgenstein therefore claim that there are no words with consistent, universal meaning. We must agree that "good" and "bad" are no exception. For example, the use of "good" in "a good distance" is usually synonymous with "extensive," which is certainly not what we mean when we evaluate something. But I wish to make clear that the definitions offered spell out the meanings of these terms only for every evaluative use. An evaluative use shall be understood as any use essentially related to the determination of a possible choice. Under these conditions "good" and "bad" seem to be remarkably consistent.

The best way to test a hypothesis of this sort is to look for exceptions. The following objections and replies represent an attempt to show that there are no obvious exceptions to the definitions:

Objection (1): There are many things we call "good" which consistently elicit a repulsion, never an attraction: bitter medicines, strenuous exercise, boring but necessary tasks.

Reply: Since such things are good only as a means to something else, they would be found to attract only in that context. However, a certain quality they possess in themselves (e.g., the bitterness of medicine) may be repellent to such a degree that it "drowns out" the attraction. Still there are several ways to detect this attractiveness: (1) by con-
sidering the item in abstraction from its repellent quality; (2) by noting a diminishment of repulsion when the item's
equality is considered (as when the sting of iodine is reduced by thinking of the good it is doing); (3) by sim­
ply inferring that the item is good in virtue of its conduc­
civeness to an attractive goal.

Objection (2): Our fascination with death and
dangerous beasts has been explained as curiosity. But let us assume that a soldier who long ago ceased to be curious about the enemy is suddenly confronted with a soldier from the other side. His attention would be glued to every move his enemy makes.

Reply: We must ask, exactly what it is to which a soldier's attention would be attracted under such circumstances. He would be looking for potentially dangerous acts, not, for instance, the color of his enemy's eyes. Attending carefully to the enemy's actions is behavior that has become in­
strumentally attractive, the attractive end being survival.

Objection (3): What about people who find them­selves constantly rehearsing the awful details of some past ordeal? This sounds like pragmatic at­
traction; yet the individual would certainly not call it "good."

Reply: As indicated earlier, motive attraction and repulsion are not the only principles of attention. Bad memories can constantly recur through the principle of association. Re­
fection shows that the more intense an experience the stronger the associational ties and the intensity of the images. Thus, anything remotely associated with disaster continues to remind us vividly of it. We still find atten­
tion trying to escape these memories.

Objection (4): Ordinary language is still far more capricious than suggested. How can the definition explain:

(a) a frightened person who says, "You gave me a
good scare";

(b) the pacifist who acknowledges that the neu­
tron bomb is a "good anti-tank weapon";

(c) individuals who say that rain is good for the
grass, an entity to which nothing could ap­
pear attractive;

(d) pure expressions of feeling, like "good gra­
cious!"

Reply: Each of these cases requires sensitive analysis.
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Sentence (a) has the ring of irony to it, though it has faded somewhat into a cliche. "A good scare" is simply used to mean its opposite. For (b) there are two possibilities. One possibility is that the pacifist speaker is being ironic. The other is that he is making a straight-forward appraisal in a theoretical, not a moral mode. Theoretically, anything which solves problems efficiently is attractive. Sentence (c) also has two possibilities: either the speaker himself finds grass attractive, which would make the rain instrumentally good (such people never, except when being ironic, speak of rain being good for the weeds); or the speaker thoughtlessly regards grass as conscious (and perhaps talks to his plants). As for (d), here we have an emotive expression which now has nothing to do with the meanings of the words used. We know the speaker is using them for totally nonpropositional purpose, not for their meaning.

Objection (5): There are many strong arguments that "good" is a term of commendation. Even the O.E.D. defines it as such. By regarding the term as purely descriptive, the proposed definition contradicts an obvious fact and must therefore be false.

Reply: The definition in no way precludes the use of value sentences or even the word by itself to commend something. We must not, as Searle reminds us,[38] confuse the meanings of terms with their use. R.M. Hare seems to be correct in claiming that to commend is to "guide choices," though he mistakenly thinks that value judgments accomplish this as "modified" imperatives.[39] (Clearly, if someone told us car X was good and we bought car Y instead, he could not reasonably respond that he had told us to buy X.) But being told that something is pragmatically attractive can, in a sense, "guide" our choices. If we already find it attractive, the statement will reinforce our tendency to choose it by bringing it to mind. If we do not, the statement may provoke us to look for features that make it attractive, perhaps even to ask, "What is good about it?" We may be moved to choose something if we become convinced that some property we had not considered makes it attractive.

Objection (6): Searle and Brandt both contend that "good" is actually used on different occasions to convey different descriptive meanings. If we look at random samples we can see that that is true. "A beer would be good right now," clearly indicates that the speaker desires a beer. "This ice cream is sure good," tells us the speaker finds its taste pleasant. Examples such as these demonstrate that the phenomenological description does not capture the universal evaluative meaning of "good."

Reply: We have to distinguish the primary from the secon-
dary or suggested meaning of a value judgment. The objection does not demonstrate that "good" does not indicate that the item is motively attractive in some specific context; it shows only that the sentences have another meaning as well. Just as saying "she took the pill and became ill" implies (but does not state) that she became ill because she took the pill, value judgments often suggest further meanings because of what is specifically said. "A beer would be good right now," would, by the phenomenological definition, primarily state that the idea of presently drinking a beer is motively attractive to the speaker. But, microphenomenologically, to desire anything is to find one's own immediate action on behalf of it attractive. And "right now" conveys this sense of here-and-now urgency. Hence we infer that the speaker desires a beer on the basis of what is said. Again, the exuberance expressed by the exclamation, "This ice cream is sure good," coupled with the attractiveness referred to by "good" tells us that the attraction is presently great enough to elicit attractive feelings, i.e., pleasure. Hence, the ice cream is suggested to be pleasant. In fact without the phenomenological meaning as the basis for inference, it is not at all clear how we could know what such sentences mean.

Objection (7): By making values dependent on psychological responses, the phenomenological proposal is no different from any other "naturalistic" theory of value; it makes all values relative. As a result it reduces ethical values to a hodge-podge of conflicting values or, at best, the biases of the majority.

Reply: While the suggested definitions allow for personal variations in value, they do not preclude at all the possibility of a sense of "good" that is independent of the responses of any particular individual or group. If, as I suspect, the moral context is one that is apparent only when one assumes a certain disinterested attitude, the "moral point of view," then only the judgments of anyone who addresses the world from this special standpoint could truly predicate moral value. Moral judgments would thus be standpoint-relative rather than individual-relative. Such a point-of-view theory must resolve a number of problems, to be sure, but its very possibility demonstrates that the relativism to which the proposed definitions commit us is not a vicious relativism.

It is hoped that the foregoing considerations demonstrate that a new approach to metaethics, microphenomenology, is both plausible and worth pursuing in greater detail. As a method, it differs from "naturalism" in that it is not based on what can be empirically sensed. And unlike "intui-
tionism" it does not find values independent or absolute; values are only certain attentional dispositions inherited or acquired by the human organism. But microphenomenology does nevertheless hold out hope for an "objective" ethics, one in which the truth of its propositions does not hinge on the individual psychology of the judging agent. All that counts towards a judgment's truth or falsity is whether those individuals meant to be included in the affective extension of the judgment are in fact attracted to or repelled by the item's existence in the sense intended.

FOOTNOTES


3. The so-called "open question" argument introduced by G.E. Moore and borrowed by other writers was intended to preclude the possibility of a universal descriptive definition. But the argument itself has proven faulty. See Arthur N. Prior, Logic and the Basis of Ethics (London, 1965), 1-12 for an objection to Moore's version that would also apply to those of Ayer and Stevenson. For a critique of Hare's version see Searle's Speech Acts, 132 ff.

4. While there have been phenomenological writers who have addressed the question as to what values are, none has sought to determine systematically what value terms mean. Without attending too closely to the way we actually talk about values, Jean-Paul Sartre (Being and Nothingness), Edmund Husserl (Ideas) and Nicholai Hartmann (Ethics) wind up with very different descriptions of value. Linguistic analysis can serve as a check on our phenomenological descriptions. If value language refers to anything at all we should be able to pin down the phenomena meant at the intentional intersections of our various verbal references to them.


6. For example, going to the dentist may be good but it is not "pleasurable;" the taste of coffee is good but it seems strange to call it "desirable;" and construing "interest" in terms of behavior, as the theory is propounded, we can say that it is good that intelligence evolved in humans, but there is nothing to take an interest in, behaviorally speaking.


8. Ibid., 13.

10. Ibid., 5.

11. Ibid., 30.

12. In "Moral and Non-Moral Values: A Study in the First Principles of Axiology," in *Readings in Ethical Theory*, 2nd ed., eds. Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers (New York, 1970), 169-70, C.A. Campbell raises the point that if being "good" meant merely being liked or desired or approved, we would be imputing far less permanence to good things that we actually do, since our likings can be ephemeral. In short, we understand values to persist with considerable stability. Treating values as dispositions would account for these attributions of quasi-permanence.


16. "Instrumentalists" like John Dewey and Monroe Beardsley deny that there are any intrinsic values, only instrumental ones. But that would mean that for any given value there must be some other value to which it conduces. It is hard to understand, for example, what further value the good flavor of a hot fudge sundae must serve.


21. Ibid., 30.

22. See Fn. 2.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 126ff.


26. Ibid., 29.


28. Ibid.
29. Ibid, 328-33.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 71, 72.

36. In The Sources of Value (127ff.) Pepper argues for an "independence mutation," the conditioning of values as goals in themselves (the golfer's sticks, the smoker's pipes). It seems obvious that we do, in fact, seek independent goals acquired through experience. My point is that these new goals are still tied to the original stimulus by association, not that they are a means to the original stimulus. The association itself seem sufficient to render something an independent object of pursuit.


38. Speech Acts, 139.