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The Cognitive Structure of Value, Fairness, and Reciprocity

How do humans conceptualize systems of value? The hypothesis is that value is conceptualized as an abstract (non-perceptible) property attributed to objects, persons, and actions. The value of an entity plays a role in a suite of inference rules which affect the way one reasons about the entity and acts on it.

There are several distinct types of value, including Affective value (does it *feel* good or bad?); Utility (is it good *for* me?); Prowess (is so-and-so good *at* doing such-and-such); Normative value, which includes moral value as a subcase (is it good *of* so-and-so to do such-and-such?); Personal Normative value (is so-and-so a good person?); and Esteem (does so-and-so have a good reputation?). In addition, values can be differentiated as subjective (is it good for *me*? for *you*?) versus objective (is it good, period?). Each of these kinds of value plays a different role in the ecology of the value system.

I will work through several important inference rules that determine the interaction of multiple values in determining one's course of action and one's expectations of others' actions. I will develop formal treatments of fairness, the system of the concepts of reciprocity, restitution, honoring, shaming, and apology, as well as the system of obligations, rights, and exchange. I will also address the question of what we think of as “true” altruism rather than concealed self-interested behavior. It will be possible to ask what aspects of values are culture-dependent, and what aspects are consequences of human (and even primate) universals.