

# Values: Our Hidden Governors

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6–7 Minuten

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The other day while driving the car, the radio suddenly played the old song by Gilbert O’Sullivan, ‘Get Down’. I remembered the music and how much I used to like it decades ago. So I sang along, but then my mind stumbled over the line: “Once upon a time I drank a little wine, was as happy as could be.” Is that the epitome of enjoyment? Yes, I do appreciate a fine glass of wine, but I avoid getting tipsy, simply because it diminishes my ability to enjoy rather than increasing it. Fortunately, I know much, much more enjoyable experiences, in my work, in my relationships, being out in nature, listening to music, or during my daily TM-meditation programme. No, I cannot place that much value on “drinking a little wine.”

Values are not *what* we value, but rather *why* we value something. A painting by Picasso is not of value. What makes it valuable is the name of the artist we attach to it. Values are the criteria for our evaluation. We value something or someone because we project quality on to it or him or her that we believe to contribute to at least someone’s happiness. That quality makes it of value. When we consider Picasso to have been one of the greatest painters of all time, we attach this evaluation to his “masterpiece.”

We believe in values, no matter whether we are aware of these beliefs or not. The power of values is rooted in the fact that we believe in them, knowingly or unknowingly. Values are beliefs as to what composes good behavior and what produces a good quality of

life. Values program our choices and, as the outcome of our choices, determine our experiences. Do our experiences, individual and collective, prove our values to be wise? Do they produce wonderful experiences like excellent health, expanding happiness, fulfilling relationships, peace, progress, prosperity for all, a planet rejoicing in thriving eco-systems?

In turn, experiences shape our values. When I was a teenager, it felt great when I joined my peer group in smoking cigarettes. After a while, I honestly enjoyed the smell of my freshly lit cigarette, especially outdoors in the fresh air. After I stopped smoking, I discovered a far more extended and profound range of pleasure that opened up to me like a blue sky after the clouds are gone: food tasted ten times better, the fragrances out in nature, like that of a rose, were much more intense. So I gained a lot more pleasure than I had given up and, as a result, my values changed. Could it be that our values can keep us from enjoying far more than we do? Or even worse, that our values make us suffer terribly, both individually and collectively? And, the other way around: Would us having better and better, more and more satisfying experiences make our values evolve into ones which produce more and more happiness, as the Greek philosopher Epicurus suggested? I have dedicated my time and effort to helping my fellow humans in finding within themselves, to feel, and to understand what is genuinely beneficial to them, to others, and to all life around us all. And that gives me great and steadily growing joy.

Some of us have wonderful experiences when climbing a mountain, others when swimming in the sea. What we find exciting today we may find boring tomorrow. We are unique individuals and works in progress, endowed with a greater freedom of choice than ever before in human history. We might question how well most people make use of this freedom, but are we willing to sacrifice it at the altar of the common good? And yet, are there universal values which are valid for everyone? And which are valid at all times? Simply because they contribute to the well-being of us all and our

planet as a whole? Again, the ancient Greeks expounded one of them: *Medén agàn*, nothing to excess, everything in moderation. Could it be that exploring such universal values of life, both intellectually and experientially, would provide valuable philosophical raw material for designing what then rightly could be called good governance?

Looking at the global challenges we are facing today, I follow Einstein's advice: Do not even try to solve problems at the level of awareness that created them! Being a philosophizing psychologist by profession and passion, my attention goes to the minds and hearts of entire populations, to the collective consciousness or psyche of societies. And there I find collective values operating as hidden governors, just as I did in the lives of individuals. And as is the case with individuals, these collective values change over time, revealing a dynamic pattern of cultural evolution, as observed by the *Zeitgeist* Expert Kirstine Fratz in many areas of day to day life.

Therefore I would suggest: Let us identify, evaluate and perhaps modify our collective values that shape our collective judgments (e.g. public opinion), political decisions (e.g. election outcomes), and the actions of individuals holding power positions (e.g. response to a rapidly spreading virus). How do we accomplish this? Certainly not by plunging into activism. We'd better take the wisdom of the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse to heart: "Clearly sees the one who sees from a distance, and hazy sees the one who is involved."

In doing so, we will most likely discover that we have overestimated some values at the expense of others, thus neglecting, which is to say, violating the latter ones. After making this discovery, we run the risk of repeating the same kind of underestimation, just in the opposite direction. Why not look back to the ancient Greeks: Nothing to excess! Which also implies: Nothing not enough!