

BEYOND GOALS, RULES, AND LAWS: REALIZING VALUES IN ACTION AND INTERACTION

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All human actions and interactions are attempts to realize values, where values are understood not as personal preferences, social norms, or object qualities, but as boundary conditions of ecosystems that place demands on fields of actions within them. Values are neither subjective nor objective; rather, they are about relationships and the demands that ecosystems place on those relationships. Evidence suggests that a diverse array of values (e.g., truth, social solidarity, justice, flexibility, safety, comfort) work in a cooperative tension to guide actions. Values emerge as critical constraints on action that differ from goals, rules, and natural laws, yet provide the larger context in which all of these can function effectively. Values provide strong, flexible constraints that guide actions and interactions in ways that are necessarily shared, thus affording a basis for coordination, evaluation, criticism, and social learning. This means values have a fundamental role to play in all psychological phenomena.

Examples from perception-action skills, such as driving and carrying, are presented to illustrate how seemingly simple goal-directed actions emerge from a self-organizing concert of interdependent values. Similarly, skilled coordination tasks in social psychology (e.g., negotiating disagreements; synchrony and asynchrony in interactions; selectivity in social learning) demonstrate that scientific analyses that evaluate such skills in simplistic and moralistic ways often miss the richness and subtlety of the phenomena. For example, what is often described in terms of conformity may come to look more like a complex form of truth-telling. In decision-making, actions that are isolated from their larger social contexts are often described as biased and irrational, yet placed in a larger communal context, the actions appear sensitive, grounded, and prospective.

AI and robotics are generally understood as ways that humans can develop new systems and tools that extend and refine humans' ability to engage in skilled physical and social interactions. This requires values-realizing judgments about the ends and means by which we work to help ourselves. Understanding better how the ordinary skilled actions of humans unfold may provide a stronger frame of reference for acting wisely in our interactions with information systems, robotic assistance, and other technological developments.