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# Symbolic Values

ABSTRACT: *When a symbol is a marker of a primary bearer of value and, secondarily, a bearer of value itself, then it has symbolic value. Philosophers have long been suspicious of symbolic values, often regarding them as illusory or irrelevant. I suggest that arguments against symbolic values either overgeneralize or else require premises that can only be supported if the normative significance of some symbolic considerations is presupposed. Humans need symbols to represent identity facts to themselves and others. Symbolic values thereby contribute to individuals' control over their own agency.*

KEYWORDS: symbol, symbolic value, extrinsic value, agency, autonomy

It is a philosophical commonplace to observe that values are diverse. Many valuable conditions can be experienced directly. The warmth of the summer sun, the sound of a favorite song, or the satisfaction of a good day's work all lend themselves to unmediated appreciation. Other values cannot be enjoyed so directly. We wear wedding rings, wave flags, display the colors of favored sports teams, declare regional allegiances on bumper stickers, and ponder the meaning of religious relics. Although these are valuable experiences, few think that the value inheres in rings, flags, colors, or artifacts. This latter set of objects does not (at least, not primarily) contain the values themselves. Instead, they point us in the direction of something that really is valuable: a relationship, a community, or some transcendent experience. These values are symbolic.

As I will suggest later, symbolic values are familiar in ordinary life. Yet philosophers have long regarded them warily (Carnap 1959; Scanlon 1998; Nussbaum 2013; Tessman 2015; Huemer 2013: 116–18; Brennan and Jaworski 2016). Metaphysical suspicion about symbolic values may be traceable to their seeming obscurity. If the symbol is not what really matters, then the valuable state of affairs or object may be worryingly resistant to empirical detection. One might be tempted to think that putatively symbolic values will not hold up to sustained, analytical scrutiny. Even philosophers who invoke symbolic values do so with some embarrassment, insisting that in the end the symbols will be avoided or discharged (Velleman 2005: 263).

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The aim of this paper is to offer an elaboration and modest defense of symbolic values. I will suggest that symbolic values can be morally important, either because they are important in their own right or else because they are relevantly connected to the autonomy of morally significant agents. The reasons given by symbolic values need not have any special normative status. They may sometimes be defeated or silenced by other considerations. However, contrary to the view of skeptics, this does not make symbolic values morally inconsequential. Including symbolic values in our thinking about morality can help us avoid risky moral blind spots.

The paper has five sections. The first characterizes symbolic values. The second utilizes this characterization to locate several paradigm cases. Section three develops and responds to an argument for skepticism about symbolic values. Section 4 elaborates the psychologically mediated connection between symbolic valuing and personal autonomy, and then section 5 responds to objections that this psychology reveals that symbolic values are only a nonideal feature of human normativity.

## 1. Symbolic Value

I will not try to analyze either 'symbol' or 'symbolic value'. The concepts of symbol and symbolism are invoked within a diverse range of humanistic and social scientific fields; thus, proposing any putatively authoritative definition is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, I will just try to offer a sufficient characterization in order to identify paradigm instances or what metaphysicians might call ostension. If the reader can agree to a few clear cases of symbolic value, then that will be enough to motivate the discussion that follows. The account offered here will describe the concept enough to identify such cases.

Let us begin with the idea of a symbol. Symbols are intended to transmit meanings among some group of agents. A symbol may be understood as an object, act, or state of affairs that 'serves as a vehicle' for some meaning—or what anthropologists call a 'conception' (Geertz 1973: 91). The array of possible meanings is diverse and may include both cognitive and noncognitive attitudes. Geertz includes 'ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings, or beliefs' (91). In order to communicate these meanings publicly, symbols often take a publicly visible form, providing a 'concrete embodiment' of the meaning being represented.

Nothing in this abstract characterization requires that every symbol represent something valuable, let alone be a location of value itself. However, some symbols do transmit a meaning or content with putative intrinsic value. These symbols might be thought of as pointing to or marking the value. In later sections of this paper I will suggest that intrinsically valuable entities often resist empirical observation. I will speculate that this might explain part of the appeal behind symbolic representations of these values. If we cannot have a direct, sensory experience of the value itself, a symbol for it can be reassuring in a variety of ways. Of course, not every symbolic representation of a value is also, thereby, judged to be valuable. A tourist brochure might, for instance, accurately depict a sacred site without being thought of as valuable itself.

Some symbols, however, may also be regarded as valuable, themselves in virtue of their role in transmitting the meaning of or about the value. Sometimes this value is

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instrumental. Symbols can helpfully provide information or facilitate coordination among agents (as several examples in subsequent sections will exhibit). However, not all symbolic value is instrumental. We would not say, for example, that the wedding band is an effective means to the relationship or causally produces the relationship. Rather, the ring has the relational property of symbolizing the relationship. It is natural to describe this as a species of extrinsic, final value. The value obtains in virtue of the value bearer's relational properties, rather than in virtue of its internal properties (Korsgaard 1983, 1996; Ronnow-Rassmussen 2015). Token instances of symbolic value sometimes not only lack instrumental worth but have greater sentimental value precisely in virtue of their uselessness (Hatzimoysis 2003: 375–76). Although the category of extrinsic, final value occasions some philosophical controversy, various parties to the taxonomic dispute will still be able to accept the existence of symbolic value (cf. Bradley 2006). Thus, we can set these issues aside. The important point is that philosophical interest in symbolic value need not be limited to instrumental considerations.

Although symbolic values may be extrinsic and noninstrumental, they do not exhaust the category of extrinsic, final value. Consider value-by-uniqueness, where the object is valuable in virtue of its relational properties, but the value inheres because of the object's dissimilarity to other things, rather than because it represents them or is connected to them (cf. Kagan 1998: 109). Another case is the value of historical objects. Matthes (2013) accounts for the value of historically significant objects in terms of their connection with a time in the world that is otherwise inaccessible to us. Although we cannot ever be present at events of historical import in the distant past, we can encounter objects that *were* there, and this can offer 'a sense of unity with significant moments' in world history (Matthes 2013: 62). This explanation is helpful as a way of seeing how an object can have value in virtue of its relational properties without understanding the object merely as a tool (Matthes 2013: 60).

Indeed, some bearers of symbolic value will be best understood in historical terms (as subsequent cases will show). At the same time, some symbolic values may be valuable in virtue of how they represent a person's or group's future, rather than because of their connection to the past. Likewise, some historically significant objects—imagine an original copy of the constitution, for example—may matter more in themselves than for what they say or transmit about something else. Although informative, the category of symbolic value diverges extensionally from historical value.

Without worrying about the category's precise boundaries, we can generally describe symbolic values in the following way:

(1) A symbolic value is a linguistic or nonlinguistic marker of something else, which is the primary bearer of value.
(2) The symbolic value is a secondary bearer of value in virtue of its connection to the primary bearer of value.

So far, this description is meant to be merely clarifying, rather than to invite any philosophical controversy. Besides the well-known wedding ring example, consider Scanlon's prominent invocation of the symbolic value of choice. The

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ability to choose one's spouse (at least in some societies) is a marker of the status of being a full member of the society, and this is an intrinsically valuable status to have (Scanlon 1998: 253).

## 2. Paradigm Cases

In this section I will outline three cases in which putative symbolic values have been explicitly viewed as normatively significant. My aim in this section will not be to defend the normativity of symbolic values, but just to illustrate their function in moral and political disputes. In particular, this section will describe a symbolic protest, a religious emblem, and a symbolic moral exemplar.

### 2.1 Veterans at Standing Rock

In the fall of 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe initiated a protest against the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline, which the tribe feared would harm sacred burial sites and pollute the Missouri River a short distance above tribal lands. Demonstrators clashed with law enforcement and pipeline construction security workers in a series of well-publicized encounters. With national media attention and support from a number of other tribes, the Standing Rock Sioux refused demands to desist. Tribal leaders reported hundreds of injuries from rubber bullets, pepper spray, and water cannons (Mele 2016).

Fearing further escalation—including a threat by the Army Corps of Engineers to close access to the protestors' campsite—an organization called Veterans for Standing Rock assembled as many as 2000 veterans to serve as 'human shields' for protestors (Mele 2016). Their aim was to employ military-style organization in an effort to maintain the physical security of the protesting tribal members peacefully. The group took orders from Loreal Black Shawl, a veteran and descendant of two Native American tribes.

The movement was at least temporarily successful, with the Department of the Army announcing in early December that it would seek other routes for the pipeline (Healy 2016). However, the group was not designed to have instrumental value alone. The Standing Rock Sioux's tribal chairman told the veterans, 'You guys are very symbolic. What you're doing is sacred' (Healy 2016). In a context in which local ranchers and their political representatives (including a United States senator) had expressed suspicions about the lawfulness of the tribal movement, the veterans' involvement sent a conspicuous signal to the outside world. The tribe was seen as opposing government action and, concomitantly, defying the country of which the tribes and veterans were members. Their perceived loyalty to their country was thereby jeopardized. In the United States, especially in the conservative, rural West, veterans are identified as paragons of patriotic sacrifice. If veterans were willing to sacrifice for Standing Rock's cause, then that cause could not be easily dismissed as antipatriotic.

Members of the group explicitly invoked national values to justify their participation. One person reported that he 'just couldn't believe what was happening in the United States. Even in Iraq, there were some rules of

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engagement' (Archambault II, quoted in Healy 2016). Another veteran described his service as a human shield by appealing to the military ideal to sacrifice the self for 'something that means something' (Healy 2016). Protecting vulnerable lands and populations should also be a distinctively American ideal. More than that, however, these veterans' explained rationales appealed to values that not only could be recognized by anyone, but that anyone would have reason to value actively. That is, anyone would have good reason to judge the cause to be valuable and additionally to feel related emotions and act accordingly (cf. Scheffler 2010; Raz 2001). The tribe's cause was seen as something compatible with patriotic sentiments, and also (in the sense just described) as impersonally valuable (cf. Matthes 2015).

By representing sacrifice for the political community, the veterans could symbolically contest the narrative of a selfish tribe undermining a national interest. The tribe's concerns thereby represented an American value and a morally weighty one as well. The veterans' involvement reframed the conflict as one internal to patriotism, rather than one between patriotism and subversion. Beyond the value intrinsic to the veterans' cause, the group also had value in virtue of the meaning their participation provided. This value was something tribal leaders appreciated directly.

## 2.2 The Cross in Christianity

Following the execution of their leader as a political subversive, early Christians adopted the cross as a symbol of their incipient movement. Their selection was an odd one. Stoics and Socratics alike favored death by suicide, which demonstrated that even at the threshold of death, the person living it retained control over its most important events. Crucifixion deprived a person of such control in the most humiliating way, rendering its victim unable to maintain control of anything about their surroundings—including, ultimately, the function of one's own physical body. To onlookers crucifixion underscored that the victims could not determine the course of their own life, but were helpless before extant political powers. The cross signaled a similar collective dependency to first-century Jews in Roman-occupied Palestine. Jewish expectations for Messianic deliverance focused hopes on a military-political leader who would liberate the Jews from the occupying power. It was unthinkable that such a leader would be killed as an example of Rome's unqualified control (Wright 1996: 406–407).

Early followers of Jesus were well aware that the cross was a puzzling symbol to choose. Reflecting the twin concerns just described, Paul wrote in an early letter that the cross was 'foolishness to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews'. But Jesus's movement had been paradoxical from the start. He had declared not that the kingdom of God would shortly be realized through violent rebellion, but instead that the kingdom was already present, constituted in part by a refusal of violence. As much a political movement as a religious one, Jesus and his early followers purported to upend Roman rule by denying the authority of the tools of force and power that supported it (Crossan 2008; Wright 1996). Their insistence on avoiding these tools made that denial look credible. In the 'newly symbolic world'

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they sought to establish, the cross was not the ultimate symbol of Christ's failure, but rather a compelling testimony of his final success. Even in death, Jesus allowed the powers of evil to 'do their worst' rather than use force to deny them (Wright 1996). The cross signaled his faithfulness to his own revolutionary message, and so overturned the symbol's typical and intended meaning. To early followers, the cross 'represented a powerful counter-cultural and then counter-imperial symbol' (Wright 2013: 407; but compare Saiving 1960; Coakley 2013).

How can this symbol be understood? There is no space here for details, but the most basic idea is that the image of the cross both pointed to Jesus himself and also expressed a willful rejection of Roman power and the worldview supporting it. Neither Jesus nor the ideal he had espoused could be physically observed. Jesus had died (though his imminent return from heaven was anticipated by Paul's earliest readers). And the kingdom Jesus had proselytized was a normative ideal and so best understood as an abstract object rather than a physical one. It makes sense, in this context, that early Christians would need symbols to mark the intrinsic values they preached.

Secondarily, the cross itself became something to which appropriate acts of religious devotion could be shown. Thus, as a symbol that could be directly appreciated, the image of the cross could be regarded as a secondary bearer of final value in virtue of its connection to the intrinsic goods it represented. In contrast to the veterans for Standing Rock, one might well regard the cross as a value that anyone could recognize and respect, but that not everyone would have good reason to value directly (cf. Matthes 2015: 1015–16). Non-Christians might not, for example, expect to feel the range of emotions associated with the relevant value. And moreover, non-Christians might have good reason to eschew wearing or representing the cross even while recognizing its value. As I will discuss in section 4, whether one should value a symbol can depend on particular facts about identity.

## 2.3 Mother Theresa

Mother Theresa gained fame for her devoted service to the poor of Calcutta, India. Details of her ministry do not matter for the present. Instead, I will focus this third example on the kind of controversy that symbolic values can provoke. In a popular essay on morality, the psychologist Stephen Pinker suggested that Mother Theresa's status as a symbol of moral goodness led people collectively to overestimate the relative size of her moral contribution. To illustrate his point, he compared Mother Theresa to Bill Gates, observing that if we cared about the 'objective' facts about value, it was a simple mistake to favor Mother Theresa over Gates for sainthood—the kind of mistake that humans are prone to make, but a mistake all the same. He sums up his point:

> Our heads can be turned by the aura of sanctity, distracting us from a more objective reckoning of the actions that make people suffer or flourish. It seems we may all be vulnerable to moral illusions the

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> ethical equivalent of the bending lines that trick the eye on cereal boxes and in psychology textbooks. (Pinker 2008)

If Bill Gates has done more to eliminate suffering in aggregate than Mother Theresa, then it is a mistake to regard the latter as more virtuous. Mother Theresa's status as a symbol, on this view, does more to confuse than to enlighten about the moral facts.

Against this picture, theologian Gary Anderson counters that Mother Theresa's symbolic value is itself morally important. He describes how widely diverse individuals in different faith traditions have been inspired by Mother Theresa's example of moral devotion. But more than just instantiating moral devotion, Mother Theresa's life represents to other persons the moral value of redemptive charity. Anderson sees the point of charity in religious life as laying up a 'treasure in heaven' for the person who performs charity on earth. On his account, this does not suggest that charity is ultimately self-interested. Rather, the point is that charity displays faith that—against all appearances—the world is organized as an expression of divine mercy (2013: 32–33). He writes, 'we want to believe that the world is good and, at least in the long run, rewards a life of charity. The holy men and women of the synagogue, church, and mosque help us to do just that' (2013: 6). On this theological picture, the symbolic value of Mother Theresa helps many others maintain an intrinsically valuable faith in their own lives.

The structure of this exchange is straightforward. Pinker at least appears to doubt the reality of Mother Theresa's symbolic value. He appears to think that it is a 'moral illusion'. One way of interpreting him is as taking a skeptical line on whether the symbolic component of her work is really valuable at all. He is, we might say, *ontologically suspicious* of symbolic values. The skeptical view is superficially free from philosophical commitment. What really matters, on this view, are the kinds of clearly observable costs and benefits that any morally sensitive person would affirm. But that objection met with a ready reply. There is an observable social practice of valuing Mother Theresa as a kind of moral exemplar. Even a cursory investigation of her life and history reveals that her value as an exemplar does carry significance for many people. There is nothing mysterious about any of this (cf. Cullity 2004). The critic now occupies the odd position—having begun with the hard-nosed insistence that only *real* costs and benefits matter—of either denying the empirical reality of Mother Theresa's symbolic significance or having to adopt a much more philosophically involved position about which of those apparent costs and benefits get to 'count' morally. It now seems like the skeptic about symbolic value has made a wrong turn.

## 3. Skepticism about Symbolic Value

So far, I have identified a category of symbolic value and illustrated how the category might be populated with cases. The preceding subsection described one form of skepticism about symbolic values that more or less denies that there are any. As will become clearer in the next section, I regard this ontological form of

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skepticism as unpromising. But philosophically subtler forms of skepticism may also be pressed against symbolic values.

One of the most compelling challenges to symbolic value has recently been pressed by Jason Brennan and Peter Jaworski (2015, 2016). They point to a series of cases in which honoring purported symbolic values can have morally undesirable or even disastrous consequences. We are symbolically opposed to the idea of paying money for human body parts, but as a result there is a shortage of life-saving kidneys. In some cultures, endocannibalism is regarded as expressing respect for the dead. But eating the dead transmits a fatal disease. Some people think anesthesia expresses religious disrespect, but in such a culture it does not seem that parents should feel constrained not to provide anesthesia to a child going in for surgery, for example. One might dispute the details about some case or other, but the existence of such examples is beyond question. Brennan and Jaworski plausibly hold that in these cases, it makes better moral sense to change the symbolic meanings than it does to follow them at such high costs.

Of course, symbolic meanings are social rather than private facts, and as such, they may resist our best efforts to revise them in morally preferable ways. In these cases, Brennan and Jaworski recommend conscientiously refusing to follow the moral code that symbolic values support (2015: 1071; 2016: 72). In short, the idea is that when symbolic values run up against nonsymbolic values, the latter should prevail. We might reproduce their argument as follows:

1. Moral codes that are based on symbolic values have bad consequences.
2. No one should be obligated to follow a moral code if following it will have bad consequences.
3. We can either follow moral codes, try to change them, or refuse to follow them.
4. Thus, we should try to change, or refuse to follow, moral codes that are based on symbolic values.

It is worth pausing a moment to understand how this argument functions. Brennan and Jaworski are not ontologically skeptical. They allow that eating your relatives does express respect, and they also do not deny that expressing respect is valuable. They thereby skirt the philosophically and sociologically controversial thesis that symbolic values are mere illusions. However, it is important to note that their metaphysical open-mindedness does not commit them to affirming that there is *pro tanto* reason to eat your relatives, but that this reason is defeated by the more important consideration of avoiding mortal diseases. Instead, they hold that—at least in cases where the costs of adhering to symbolic values have an especially high magnitude—'the duty to comply disappears or is silenced, not merely defeated or outweighed' (2015: 1071). This finding seems intuitively correct. It would be odd to think that there was something to be regretted about avoiding a fatal disease by not eating the dead or anesthetizing a child about to undergo an otherwise very painful surgery. Further, it does not seem like performing such actions would leave a 'moral residue'—as we might expect if

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there were *pro tanto* moral reason not to perform them. We might say that Brennan and Jaworski are *normatively skeptical* of symbolic values.

I agree that Brennan and Jaworski have correctly diagnosed what is going on in all of the cases they consider. However, I do not think it follows that we should try to change, or else refuse to follow, moral codes that are based on symbolic values. To see what might be going wrong, it will help to focus on exactly how symbolically based reasons are being silenced in the cases described above. According to Brennan and Jaworski, the crucial idea is that the reasons 'disappear'—it is not just that they are silenced in the sense that it becomes deliberatively inappropriate to attend to them. Garrett Cullity (2013) usefully describes silencing cases like these as one species of 'context-undermining'. Cullity himself uses a similar example, which will be useful to consider (2013: 19–20). In Cullity's case, you must decide which of two children to take on a train ride. Bill loves trains, and it is also Bill's birthday. Ben does not love trains, and it is not his birthday. In normal cases, it would be reasonable to use these considerations to decide to take Bill rather than Ben. However, suppose—drastically—that the child left behind will, for some reason, die. It no longer seems appropriate to use Bill's appreciation of trains or the fact that it is his birthday to decide to take him. These considerations do not count as reasons, even if the reasons to take either child are otherwise the same. The severity of the consequences for Ben create a context in which the reasons for favoring Bill are silenced. This is similar to Brennan and Jaworski's cases, in which severe consequences also silence symbolically given reasons.

Why strain over these details about the nature of reasons-silencing? The answer is that it will be relevant to how we assess the argument I attributed to Brennan and Jaworski above. Recall premise 2 in their argument, which held that if a symbolically supported moral code has bad consequences, then it cannot be obligating. That premise might have appeared very controversial. For one thing, many nonconsequentialists believe that we are sometimes obligated to act in nonoptimific ways. Beyond that, there might well be cases where acting in support of a symbolic value has bad consequences, but failing to do so has worse consequences (more on this below). Thus, it is not immediately clear why we would accept this premise. However, if a symbolic value's bad consequences create a context in which the reasons given by that value are silenced, then this would explain how we could generalize to the conclusion that there is never a duty to act on behalf of such values.

Now we are in position to make one further inquiry. Why is it, we might wonder, that severe consequences create a silencing context for symbolic reasons? Brennan and Jaworski do not propose an answer although—as I noted—their solution does fit our intuitions. Cullity, however, does put forth an explanation. He writes:

> Changes in contextual facts can change the nature of an action, and the reasons for an action depend on its nature. We are familiar with this phenomenon in its positive form: contextual facts can make taking your hat off a gesture of respect, and thus, create a reason to do it. (2013: 20)

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Cullity goes on to explain that the best explanation for the kind of context-undermining cases described in this section is a negative version of this phenomenon. To be sure, letting a child die is never something to feel reassured about. But it feels especially wrong to choose which child to save based on whose birthday it is because acting on this consideration changes the nature of the action. The action changes from a tragic choice to one that expresses a particular disregard for one of the children. And expressing disregard for one's child is wrong. Thus, the context imparts a meaning to the action that silences the reason. The endocannibalism case fits nicely in the same category. It might usually be a fine thing (and so, supported by *pro tanto* moral reasons) to express respect for one's ancestors, but even thinking there is a reason to expose oneself to a mortal disease would be to disregard one's own life. The severity of that context gives the action a new meaning, silencing the other reasons.

Let us take stock. Brennan and Jaworski provided an intuitively appealing argument for normative skepticism about symbolic value. In order to succeed, a necessary premise for this argument was that bad consequences silence the normative reasons given by symbolic values. Moving beyond Brennan and Jaworski, I then borrowed from the general literature on the silencing of reasons to explain how this might work. What has emerged, however, is remarkable. The explanation for silencing turned on how the presence of severe consequences can alter the meaning of an action. In everyday cases, benefiting a child because it is the child's birthday shows appropriate acknowledgment of that child. In extreme cases, saving one child over another because it is his birthday shows disregard for the value of the child. The child's life has intrinsic value, and denying that trivial considerations bear on that value is one way of showing appropriate respect or regard for it. Thus, not assigning the issue of whose birthday it is any normative status in the extreme case is extrinsically connected to the value of the child in a reason-giving way. This is just a long way of saying that in the extreme case, the symbolic valence of the action has changed. In other words, the explanation for context undermining reasons in cases of severe consequences did not deny that symbolic considerations carry normative significance. Instead, it *required* that symbolic considerations carry normative significance. The reason that the original symbolic reasons were silenced is precisely because we are following a moral code based, in part, on symbolic considerations.

This result is a problem for Brennan and Jaworksi's defense of normative skepticism. As I have outlined their argument, a necessary premise in the argument could only be defended by an explanation that denied the argument's final conclusion. Of course, Brennan and Jaworski need not accept that particular defense of the troubling premise. But they then would face the following options:

(a) Revert to ontological skepticism: Deny that symbolic values *ever* have normative significance.
(b) Defend normative skepticism: Provide an explanation for why symbolic values are silenced, where this explanation does not itself require the normative significance of symbolic reasons.

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(c) Grant that symbolic values have nonsilenced normative significance, but hold that the resulting reasons are defeated by nonsymbolic considerations.

Perhaps there are other options, but I believe these are the most likely. Nevertheless, none of these routes appears easy to follow. The difficulty with (a) was anticipated by the end of the previous section. Ordinary human beings value things in a diversity of ways—some symbolic, some not. Why, we might wonder, should only the nonsymbolic ways of valuing get to matter morally, when the whole range of human valuing seems to be otherwise significant to the meaningfulness of human lives (cf. Scheffler 2010)? The problem with (b) is that it is not clear what else could silence the reasons besides a change in the nature or meaning of the action.

I have not yet addressed (c), but before leaving this section, I want to suggest that this option will actually expose another way of seeing what is wrong with Brennan and Jaworski's argument. I do not believe it will be possible to establish that (c) is correct in a general way. As identified before, premise (2) holds that we need not follow moral codes with bad consequences. But this is ambiguous between *pro tanto* and all-things-considered interpretations of 'bad consequences'. Let us grant that symbolic values all have bad consequences. It does not follow, once the code associated with the symbolic values is in place, that following that code will have worse consequences than refusing to follow it or trying to change it. Brennan and Jaworski's examples obscure this possibility by focusing on cases in which the consequences of following symbolic values are severe. If the costs of symbolic values are bad enough, then it is of course very likely that they will not be outweighed by the associated benefits of following a symbolically based code. But there is no reason to think the costs of symbolic values will always be severe.

Consider a simple case. Suppose there is a practice of allowing one's elders to eat first at dinner, as a symbol of respect for them. Suppose, further, that this practice has some very modest bad consequences. If we all collectively wait on the elders, this might just make them feel self-conscious while letting everyone's food get cold. Perhaps, on balance, we would all be better off if we could collectively get rid of this symbol of respect. Does that fact make it the case that I should try to change or else ignore the associated moral code? Not obviously. Perhaps if I try to change or ignore the code, everyone else will react against this in ways that are even worse than if I comply with the code. There is no contradiction in thinking that the code is bad but that trying to change or ignore the code is worse. That is not good news, but I would even suggest that it is far too common a human experience to retain any air of paradox.

What is going on in cases like this? Cullity's context-undermining account fits the data nicely. When the consequences of symbolic values are not severe, there is nothing to change the meaning of one's actions, and so the reasons given by the symbolic values retain force. But in that case, symbolic reasons might defeat nonsymbolic reasons, and so (2) would be false. If the consequences are severe, then the symbolic reasons are silenced, but this just seems to support the thought that there has been a change in symbolic valence. In short, it seems we need to keep intact the normativity of symbolic considerations either way. If that is right,

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then there is no way of defending premise (2) that does not also deny the conclusion of the argument for normative skepticism.

## 4. The Psychology of Symbolic Values

Perhaps normative skepticism about symbolic values is too strong a thesis, just as ontological skepticism was. A more charitable way of interpreting the skeptical challenge might be to hear the skeptics as making a more or less empirical generalization about the world. According to this generalization, symbolic values are generally more trouble than they are worth in the moral economy of human society. And this is a thought well worth considering. At the individual level, we construct byzantine religious and social conventions, attribute moral significance to them, and then proceed to react with anger and frustration when others run afoul of them or try to change them. Certainly one might think that all of this is bad for our relationships with others. The more general the level of human organization we observe, the worse things might look. We imagine national communities and out of these invented loyalties we implement policies that more level-headed economists understand to make everyone worse off (Baron, Ritov, and Green 2011; Kateb 2000).

There are a variety of ways in which we might specify this form of skepticism. I will describe the following as *observational skepticism* about symbolic values:

In cases of normative conflict, we should generally expect that nonsymbolic values ought to be prioritized above symbolic values.

This thesis does not claim that symbolically based considerations are always defeated by nonsymbolic ones, nor does it claim that symbolic reasons are silenced. It just takes as a general rule of thumb that in the kinds of conflicts in which human beings too often find themselves, we are better off not letting our symbolic values get in the way of values that are somehow more concrete, universal, or psychologically independent.

I think this skeptical view is closer to the truth. But given that we are now firmly in the world of actual human interaction, we can only know how far this skepticism can go by reviewing the findings of the social sciences on how symbols function in human communities. That is too tall an order for this paper, but I want to highlight a few ways in which symbolic values might have an unexpected psychological significance to human agency. And if, with many philosophers, we regard human agency as an important locus of moral concern, then observational skeptics cannot leave symbolic values entirely behind.

Let us start with the idea of a self. Again wanting to avoid undue conceptual controversy, I will introduce a few terms of art from the relevant psychological literature only to aid in exposition of a few findings that will bear on the observational skepticism thesis. To that end, we can provisionally follow social psychologists in understanding the self as a composite of different self-aspects, where a self-aspect is an 'organizing concept' that describes or labels some particular role and through which various more specific traits or attributes might be understood (McConnell 2011). Examples of self-aspects might include 'student', 'teacher', 'friend', and so on. Individuals widely find conflicts or

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unclarity within their self-aspects to be aversive and so respond negatively to information that threatens to disconfirm part of their self-concept. In the face of such information, they will try to generate new evidence in favor of a threatened self-aspect (Slotter and Gardner 2014; Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1985). If, for example, I include 'teacher' as one of my self-aspects, but I encounter evidence that I lack the attributes associated with being a teacher (helpful, considerate, caring, etc.), I might react by trying to find people or facts who will affirm my self-concept. Psychologists refer to this process as 'self-completion' (Slotter and Gardner 2014: 1149).

A persistent challenge for efforts at self-completion is that the self cannot be observed directly. I cannot simply use my ordinary perceptual capacities to detect various self-aspects. As a result, I must rely on various heuristics. Just as in other cases in which the bearer of intrinsic value is out of sight, symbols can play a useful role. Individuals engage in 'self-symbolizing'—using emblems or representations of their identity as persons or as members of a group to communicate that identity to others (Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1981). These symbols can take many forms, but psychologists have found that 'tangible indicators' of a shared identity are particularly effective symbols—including 'buildings, monuments, flags, and even areas of land' (Ledgerwood, Liviatan, and Carnevale 2007: 877). As with sentimental values, the symbols associated with group identity completion may 'transcend the circumstances of a single individual' (Matthes 2015: 1022). I cannot observe my self, but I can observe the symbolic markers of my different self-aspects. I might, for example, symbolically represent my self-aspect as a teacher with the physical school at which I work. And just as we would expect from the discussion in section 1, those who do associate themselves with symbols then come to regard the symbol itself as a secondary bearer of value in virtue of its connection to the self. Alison Ledgerwood, Ido Liviatan, and Peter J. Carnevale (2007) find that students rate a building associated with their school as worth more money when they are told that the building might be torn down. The authors take this as evidence that the students are sensitive not only to the value of the buildings themselves, but also invest them with another source of worth. It is this latter sense in which the buildings have symbolic value.

Given their connection to the self, it is not surprising that symbolic values can be treated as normatively significant. Like other aspects of morality, symbolic values can provide reasons that feel indefeasible. It is especially interesting that when symbolic values are at stake in a given conflict, individuals will sometimes demand symbolic concessions before expressing a willingness to compromise. Under such circumstances, offers of material concessions not only fail to elicit a favorable response, but can be actively counterproductive. In a study of the conflict between Palestinians and Israeli settlers, Atran, Axelrod, and Davis find that 'the use of material incentives to promote the peaceful resolution of political and cultural conflicts may backfire when adversaries treat contested issues as sacred values' (Atran, Axelwood, and Davis 2007: 1039–40). The authors note that only after symbolic concessions—an apology for Palestinian hardships, an official recognition of Israel, for example—would opposing parties consider making sacrifices in return.

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The picture of humanity found in results like these is, I think, deeply intelligible. Their lesson is also readily found in literature. Edward Abbey's *Fire on the Mountain* (1962) tells the story of John Vogelin, an aging rancher whose New Mexico homestead abuts the White Sands military installation. The government declares his land to be federal property, and he is given a set period of time to vacate. A government official travels to meet Vogelin on his ranch, and offers him a generous sum of money in compensation. Vogelin refuses to leave. The official tries to reason with the old man, but gets nowhere.

> 'I know how you feel, sir. I understand your feelings perfectly. It's always quite a shock to have your property pre-empted in this—'
>
> 'This is not property', the old man said. 'This is my home. This ranch is my home and my life. Try to see if you can understand that.' (Abbey 1962: 91)

Vogelin reacts to the proffered money with anger. The root of the misunderstanding between Vogelin and the government representative is that the latter fails to appreciate what kind of value is at stake. As Vogelin tries to explain, land functions as a symbol for his self—his independent status, personal history, or valued traits, and so on (cf. Matthes 2013). He understands the land in terms of how it is connected to him. His identity is significantly represented by his land, and so he cannot give it up without also abandoning part of his self-concept.

This helps explain why it makes sense for him to refuse the offer of money, but it does not yet explain why it makes sense for him to take offense at it. To see the difference, suppose that you promise to meet me for lunch, but at the appointed time you do not feel like making the trip, and so you stand me up for our meeting. When I demand an explanation, you do not apologize, but instead—knowing I am hard up for money—you offer me $100 for my troubles. By refusing to apologize, you suggest that you do not take me seriously as a member of the moral community obligations to whom ought to be fulfilled. By offering money instead, you further implicate that you expect me to interpret the matter as not requiring explicitly moralized redress. In the first case, you fail to regard me as a location from which moral demands can be authoritatively issued. In the second case, you expect me to join you in sharing that assessment from my own point of view. With your material inducement, you do not only fail to take me seriously, but you also take me to be someone who literally will not take myself seriously either (Westlund 2003). But as the empirical findings above underscore, the self is a serious thing (or at least a serious point of view)—so serious, in fact, that such offers warrant offense. Imagine if I merely politely declined your offer. A polite refusal would implicitly grant that it was reasonable for you to assume that I would not regard myself as serious and that alone might well be sufficient for self-disregard. Vogelin's anger, in this context, is a way of preserving his attribution of significance to his own point of view. As in the actual empirical cases described above, symbolic concessions are needed in response to symbolic threats.

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My suggestion here is that it will at least sometimes be a mistake to think that, as an empirical matter, symbolic values are less important than nonsymbolic ones. Not only will this misunderstand the psychology of human valuing, but it will risk serious moral costs. And physical objects like buildings and property are not the only sources of symbolic self-completion. Individuals also constitute the 'self' through close personal relationships with other individuals. A long line of sociological research has argued that 'our subjective meaning and our "self" is developed in our relationship with significant others' (Fuhse 2009). According to what symbolic interactionists call the 'looking-glass self', individuals are thought to form judgments about their own traits or characteristics in ways that mirror their perceptions of others' appraisals. A long series of psychology experiments suggest that human beings are disposed to 'internalize' self-directed attitudes in ways that reflect the influence of others. For example, Fazio and colleagues found that when subjects answer a series of leading questions designed to motivate thinking of oneself as introverted, they then affirmed a view of themselves as introverted and even acted in more introverted ways when answering an interviewer's questions. A corresponding result was achieved by a series of questions designed to motivate a self-understanding as extroverted (Fazio, Effrein, and Falender 1981).

Further, the closer a relationship is, the more important it is to our self-understanding and worldview (Fuhse 2009). The 'looking-glass self' is most likely to obtain in relationships between intimates, where prolonged interaction and close knowledge enable partners to shape each other's self-concepts (Tice and Wallace 2003). Intimate relationships have more elaborate and idiosyncratic features, making it impossible to act within them according to 'cultural blueprints' (Fuhse 2009). There is no prescribed way of ordinarily interacting with a close friend or loved one in the same way that there are general prescriptions regarding interactions with store clerks, students, or business associates.

A consequence of these facts is that close personal relationships can be freighted with symbolic meanings that other relationships lack. To illustrate, I will consider a final fictional case. In the television program *Gilmore Girls*, Lorelai, a single mother, attempts to raise her daughter Rory while keeping her own intervention-prone parents at arm's length. Upon hearing that Rory must choose a sport for school, Emily—Rory's grandmother—volunteers that she could take up golf. Conveniently, Rory's grandfather plays golf, and Emily further observes that he could teach the girl. Although Emily only provides information, Lorelai reacts with resentment. In the lines that follow, she tries to say what, precisely, about her mother's action she finds so nettlesome.

LORELAI: Don't do this, Mom.
EMILY: Do what?
LORELAI: Force Rory and Dad to go golfing.
EMILY: I'm not forcing anybody.
LORELAI: Well, you're manipulating the situation in a way that gives no one a way out. That's force. Look it up.

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In this exchange, Emily's protest that she is 'not forcing anybody' seems fair. After all, her only action is to propose an offer that Rory is left free to take up or refuse. Lorelai, however, finds it immediately obvious that this is kind of offer also counts as a forcing—indeed, she seems to think that all one needs to understand this is possession of the concept of 'force'.

What might explain this disconnect? Although presenting information about golf to Rory does not seem to force her to do anything, it does change the meaning of her choice. Before this information is provided, Rory's choice has no significance beyond that of selecting the school sport she most wants to try. After she is told that she could take up golf and that her grandfather plays golf, opting for another sport instead would also be a rejection of a closer relationship with her grandfather. The choice has acquired a significance it did not previously have—as a symbolic marker of Rory's commitment to her grandparents. With so much suddenly at stake, Rory and her grandfather are effectively forced to go golfing together. Doing otherwise would deny an important part of their respective self-concepts—as granddaughter and grandfather. And as we have seen, reasons of self-maintenance are not easily defeated.

## 5. Objections

In the preceding section I tried to show that symbolic values can be empirically important. Thus, observational skepticism is false. But one might grant the psychological characterization I have sketched and still maintain a skeptical line. One could do this by granting that human beings do engage in symbolic valuing, but simply hold that this way of valuing is a mistake. Skeptics can maintain that all of the characters (real and fictional) described in the last section are just in the grip of a normative error. They should abandon it. Alternatively, one could claim that they are not making a normative error only because of regrettable facts about human psychology. Human beings should value in this way, but we would be better off if we did not. In this section, I will respond to these points—which I will call *idealizing objections*.

The first idealizing objection says that symbolic valuing is an error. But this is only true if it is not a rational way of responding to facts about human psychology. For example, it is not irrational for me to avoid heights if I know I will be stricken with panic when I look down from them (cf. Brennan and Jaworski 2016). Likewise, it is not irrational for me to engage in symbolic valuing if not doing so would have some morally undesirable consequence. And in fact, there is good evidence that symbolic values do offer protection to aspects of the self that are genuinely morally important. Self-symbolizing enables people to understand how different self-aspects fit together, thereby maintaining the kind of self-concept clarity that facilitates the exercise of agency (Schmader, Croft, and Whitehead 2014; Emery, Walsh, and Slotter 2015). When persons cannot easily identify their self-aspects, then these aspects can only guide action through manual concentration, rather than automatic association (Schmader, Croft, and Whitehead 2014). If I have to think consciously of myself as occupying a role in order to perform the tasks associated with it, my self-awareness of my own

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activity can impair my exercise of these capacities. A famous case of this is found in the psychological phenomenon of stereotype threat—through which individual subjects have been observed to underperform on various tests when acting under conditions in which certain negative perceptions or attitudes are somehow invoked (Gendler 2011; Shih, Pittinsky, and Trahan 2006). Such cases show how symbolic values may impinge on the ability of persons to exercise their rational capacities in ways that relevantly bear on their self-governance. If we regard such capacities as bearers of moral significance, then there will be no obvious case against the rationality of treating symbols as concomitantly relevant.

Still, one might think that saying as much merely concedes a weakness about humanity. If we were psychologically less reliant on symbolic representations of the self, we would all be better off. So says the second idealizing objection. According to this objection, it would be morally better if rational agents could dispense with symbolic values, even if this cannot be asked of psychologically ordinary human beings.

I will not respond to this objection at length but only point out that its implications may be too bracing for many. Although the human practice of symbolic valuing may impose some costs, it also infuses human life with a distinctive kind of meaning. For illustration, consider one of the most celebrated of human symbols—the kiss. What would be it be like to experience a kiss in a way that was completely devoid of any symbolic content? One can imagine beings whose experience of a kiss was nothing above and beyond the physical sensation of contact with another's lips. But this would not be the typical human experience. The opening stanza of Robert Burns's 'To a Kiss' describes:

> Humid seal of soft affections,
> Tend'rest pledge of future bliss,
> Dearest tie of young connections,
> Love's first snow-drop, virgin kiss. (Burns 1897: 321)

The significance of the kiss is not just in the pressing of lips against each other, but in the suite of meanings carried in tow. The kiss is a symbol for the relationship between lovers, a promise for the future, and a seal of affections. The experience of the kiss is good in virtue of how it is related to facts about the relationship leading up to it, what it means in the present, and what it represents about the relationship's future. Shorn of its extrinsic value, the kiss would lose much of its excitement, suspense, and mystery.

This is just one case. Human life is full of symbolic content. Sometimes, that content leads us into needless conflicts or rational dead ends. But that is not sufficient to establish that more ideal beings would not constitute themselves partly through symbols.

## Conclusion

Symbolic values are both common and socially constructed. This conjunction of facts sows the seeds of moral conflict. If symbols are morally important to us but

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depend on the actions of others, then we seem to acquire a new kind of interest in how others act.

Skeptics look at these conflicts and infer that symbolic values are a mistake. We would be better off if they were not part of the normative landscape. In this essay I have tried to resist some of the most obvious forms of this skepticism. Symbolic values may not always be decisive, but neither can they be disregarded. In part, this conclusion is just a way of deferring to the practice of valuing as it actually is carried out among human agents. In a small way, acknowledging the normative significance of symbolic values is just part of respecting persons—often including ourselves—as the authors of our own ends.

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