

Values Statement

David Spivak, 2021

My values seem to differ from many people around me—at least in their verbal expression—so I thought it would be worth writing a brief description of my values to clarify where I’m coming from.

First, by *values*, I don’t mean what I think is “right” or “good”, because I don’t know what right or good really mean. What I mean instead by *values* is “that which I work towards; that which I fight for.” Good or bad, right or wrong, this is what I throw myself into.

I really only have one value, and that’s **increasing consciousness**. I don’t know exactly what consciousness is, but whatever the Greeks meant when they said “know thyself”, whatever inspired the Tao Te Ching, whatever Buddha or Jesus had according to our myths, something like a deep connection to what is; that’s what I’m talking about. I want consciousness to thrive in our world.

What can I do to make consciousness thrive? I can work to increase it in myself through honest contemplation and communication with others, and this communication also gives others an opportunity to increase it in themselves. So as corollaries to the value of increasing consciousness are my two other values: **honest contemplation and honest communication**. By contemplation and communication I mean wanting to know what’s true, both in my own experience and in that of others. For example, I contemplate some fundamental questions: What am I? What is another? What is life? What is reality?

My work in math is about trying to clear up the language around such fundamental questions. Math is a very clear and rigorous language, so if I can get mathematical language to replace English in helping me pose and consider these questions, I imagine I’ll have a much better chance at becoming conscious, clarifying the questions I’m asking and how I communicate with others about these questions.

Returning to the opening paragraph, my values seem to differ—at least in expression—from many around me. So much of what my peers say they value is left out of the above; some of my peers’ values are implied by the values I’ve described above, whereas others are simply not included in my values.

People talk about reducing suffering as a value. In my case, suffering has almost always led to increases in consciousness: I hit my head and I learn; I get made fun of at school and I develop empathy; etc. I would not want to simply reduce suffering, because I’m afraid of what would go along with it. However, I do want to *reduce trauma*; by trauma I mean a case when someone’s

consciousness is stunted because they learn a “wrong” lesson from some event, and they fall into an equilibrium that seems safer from harm but keeps them from continuing to question and explore. For example, violence tends to create trauma, so I’m against traumatic violence. Similarly, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs suggests that consciousness can really only flourish when people’s basic needs are met, so the fulfillment of people’s basic needs seems useful to me. But again, for me, this is in service of their increase in consciousness, not because of some notion of basic rights.

The Greek virtues—courage, temperance, patience, magnificence, ambition, etc.—many of these seem useful, others are a little weird. It does take courage to communicate honestly; it does take patience to keep one’s interest on the truth, rather than on premature conclusions. My main beef with virtue ethics is that I don’t really know how the virtues were chosen. The set of twelve virtues gives me a bit of the feeling I get from reading Borges’ *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, a bizarre classification of animals. Why are there so many virtues, how do we know if each is good, how do we know if the list is complete, etc.

From my viewpoint, just like evolution produced all the organisms in our world via the push and pull and struggle inherent in living, evolution also produced all the cultures of our world. All of our ethics and morality emerged naturally from the push and pull and struggle that’s inherent in living. All of our personal learning emerges naturally from the push and pull and struggle in our own lives. Evolution, broadly construed, is what creates our values. Our arguments and beliefs about what’s ethical are based squarely on the meaning we’ve attributed to our experience. So what can we do to increase our morality? It seems to me that increasing consciousness and hence more honestly aligning our meaning-making with the reality that it’s supposed to be about is our best shot.

To conclude, I’m very interested in questions of morality and ethics, but in order for me to engage, I prefer to start with very few assumptions. If someone out there is interested in talking with me about these sorts of things please do reach out.