Value is life under an interpretation: Existential commitments, instrumental reasons and disorienting metaphors

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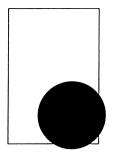**Subscriptions:** http://ant.sagepub.com/subscriptions

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Value is life under an interpretation

Existential commitments, instrumental reasons and disorienting metaphors

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Abstract

This essay unfolds the critical and conceptual implications of a particular metaphor –
theorizing value in terms of the relation between maps, terrains, and travelers. It
synthesizes some ideas from Charles Sanders Peirce, Max Weber, Martin Heidegger,
and Charles Taylor. In particular, a terrain turns on social relations and cognitive
representations. A map figures such a terrain in terms of differentially weighted
origins, paths, and destinations. And the traveler's interpretations of such a map are
equivalent to charting a course through such a terrain. Such a metaphor is used to
reframe various evaluative techniques by which we weigh the relative desirability of
possible paths through a given terrain – from instrumental values (turning on graded
and contoured landscapes) to existential values (turning on prototypic and exemplary
paths). And this framing of value is used to theorize the relation between agency and
identity.

Key Words

agency • cognitive representation • economy • identity • morality • social relation •
value

1. VALUE AS AN ORIENTING PRINCIPLE IN A SPACE OF RELATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

To understand the nature of value, one must understand the relation between maps,
terrains, and travelers.[1] As used here, a *terrain* is not a physical space, but a modal and
meaningful space – one that turns on commitments and entitlements to signify and
interpret. More concretely, it is a space of social statuses and mental states that could be
inhabited: a set of possible mediations between selves and others, and minds and
worlds.[2] A *map* is an understanding of what the places are in, and paths through, such
a terrain. Such an understanding may be tacit, such as an embodied topography; it may
be explicit, like a mental map; or it may even be enclosed and objectified, like a bound

atlas. Indeed, in key cases maps are not so much embodied as embedded: the terrain is its own best map. And a *traveler* is some kind of self-mind situated in such a terrain; someone who inhabits a set of social statuses and has a set of mental states; someone who semiotically and socially relates as a self to others and as a mind to world; someone who may both orient the map relative to the terrain (via the existential equivalent of a compass) and orient the self relative to the map (via the existential equivalent of a you-are-here spot). In short, the map is like a sign; the terrain is like the object stood for by that sign; and the traveler is like the one who interprets the map by moving through the terrain.

To talk about embodied topographies or mental maps is to project certain features onto terrains. For example, if by *place* we mean a set of social relations and cognitive representations that could be inhabited (in this space), there are *landmarks*, or particularly salient and well-known places that other places, as positions in the terrain, are oriented relative to. Places themselves may sometimes be framed as *origins* (where one sets out from), *destinations* (where one sets out to), and *paths* (how one moves from origin to destination – usually relatively well-marked and often-trod ways of going from one place to another). In short, any place within this terrain should be understood as an ensemble of social relations and cognitive representations. And any movement through this space, by moving between places *via performative transformations*, changes one or more of one's social relations, or one or more of one's cognitive representations.[3]

The terrain that such a map represents is *potentially* a very complex space – having an infinite number of dimensions, including a temporal vector. For example, any person can potentially place herself in this space by reference to their current social statuses and mental states. For example, all the social relations in which one is currently implicated: father, friend, husband, citizen, employee, Berkeley alum, first-baseman, speaker, addressee, buyer, seller, etc. And all the different cognitive representations that one is currently holding: beliefs, memories, desires, perceptions, intentions, plans, fears, shames, joys, sorrows, etc. Not only can one locate oneself on this map (only to a certain degree, needless to say, for self-knowledge is imperfect), one can also potentially locate the positions of others (perhaps better than one can locate oneself). Not only can one locate one's current position, but one can potentially remember one's past position and plan one's future position – noting the paths that link these origins and destinations. And not only can one locate oneself and others on this map (where do we stand having taken stock of ourselves, where have we stood, and where will we stand), but one can potentially map out the general layout of the terrain itself (where could one potentially stand in such a space).

Crucially, such a map indicates preferred and dispreferred places, or worthy and unworthy positions. These are the social and cognitive equivalents of mountains and valleys, oases and deserts, sweet spots and dead ends. Phrased another way, places may have both relatively primary and relatively secondary properties: not just what are the commitments and entitlements that constitute a social status or mental state, but also would or wouldn't one like to inhabit such a social status or have such a mental state. For example, one does not just have a sense of what it would be like to be a plumber or accountant, but also a sense of whether one would like to be a plumber or accountant. And one does not just have a sense of what it would be like to desire men or believe in god, but also a sense of whether one would like to have such a desire or hold such a belief. In other words, given a set of paths and destinations available from some

particular origin, one has a sense of not only where one could go, but also whether one would like to get there. How exactly such evaluation works will be the subject of the next several sections.

If a map delimits the relative desirability of paths through a terrain of social relations and cognitive representations; and if a traveler interprets the map by taking particular paths through the terrain; then their actual travels constitute an interpretant of the map (as a sign) so far as it stands for the terrain (as an object). In other words, just as I know something about the question you were asked (qua sign) by your answer to it (qua interpretant), I know something about your map of a terrain by your travels through it. In short, just as an intention may be understood as an 'action under a description' (Anscombe, 1959), we might think of *value as life under an interpretation*: each of our life-paths may be examined as the best evidence for the values we were following.

While there are many emblematic identities, many relatively public and unambiguous enactments of one's values – from self-ascriptions like 'I am a Christian' to bodily techniques like dietary restrictions – nothing beats life itself. In some sense, biography and ethnography are precisely attempts to get such a view of the entire life of another person, or the entire life-world of another culture. They usually strive to be our most explicit and accurate pictures of the maps travelers were following through some particular terrain. However, at least in the case of biography, such narrative-enabled meaningfulness doesn't come without its own streak of meanness: for one usually does not get enough critical distance to enclose a life until that life has come to a close.

The nature and origins of maps presume a community of travelers with a history, one whose members can both question and be called into question, can act or be acted on: a public or polis, culture or country, nation or ethnicity. And just as an individual biography may be understood as a path through a space of social relations and cognitive representations, so too may a collective history. In this way, not only narratives of the self, but also national histories, give meaning to changes in social statuses and mental states by tracking paths through this terrain, or establishing a terrain for one's paths (compare Bakhtin, 1981). We were tinkers and tailors, and now we are officers and gentlemen. We were slaves and now we are citizens. Once we worshiped a golden calf, now we believe in an invisible man. In having turned the other cheek, we now live hand to mouth. Once we were warriors, and now we are drunk and on the dole.

In some sense, cultural translation, or the calibration of values, is really a way of comparing the maps of any two such collectivities. In this regard, one nice feature of this metaphor is that it allows us to describe different *types of incommensurability*: any two travelers (or collectivities traveling together) may have different maps; may be placed differently relative to the same map; may place the map differently relative to the same terrain; or may have different terrains to map. Indeed, a deep sense of shared identity between any individuals is the consciously contrastive commonality that comes with orienting by means of the same map, no matter how differently the two travelers are placed relative to the terrain.

In short, a map allows travelers to track their movements through such a terrain (as well as the movements of real and imaginary others): from origins, along paths, to destinations – winding their way through preferred and dispreferred places, or worthy and unworthy social relations and cognitive representations. To say a map projects a set of values, or enables evaluation, is to say that, by indicating secondary properties of places,

a map allows a traveler to weigh the relative desirability of different paths through the same terrain. And from an observer's perspective, biography and ethnography are forms of abduction or hypothesis: if the values followed were like this, then the path taken or pattern evinced would make sense.

A perfectly functioning or ideal map should allow one just enough of a vantage to give a positive or negative valence to each and every change in social status or mental state. *But nothing is ideal*. And maps are just as much incoherent as they are coherent, just as much likely to malfunction as function. Indeed, just as in map-making more generally, the process leading to a map can go awry, or still be under construction. For example, there may be blank spots in the map: sections of space in which places and paths, perils and succors, are not yet mapped. There may be inconsistencies in the framework: circular paths, whose destination is their origin; paths that inexplicably cross; places that are both pleasureful and painful. There may be obscure conventions used on the map: what's a worthy and unworthy place may be up for debate. There may be no actual terrain the map stands for; or it may be based on faulty information; or the world may have changed in important ways since the framework was made. Indeed, the map one might articulate, or make explicit, might not conform with the topology one embodies. And different people, even if often in conversation with each other, may have contradictory maps of the same terrain.

More insidiously, the map may not be in error, but the way of orientating with it may be erroneous. Thus, one may be 'lost' in many different senses: one can lose sense of what the map stands for; one can lose sense of how the map is placed (relative to the terrain); and the traveler can lose sense of where they stand (relative to the map). Indeed, there are different modes of *semiotic compensation*, or principles of explanation and justification, whenever something goes awry in these ways: we may assume that the map is incoherent; we may assume that the territory is uncharted; we may assume that the travelers are incompetent. Judging the effectiveness of any interpretation of a 'great book' – say, in alchemy, law, psychoanalysis, political economy, critical theory, or religion – often turns on exactly this mode of compensation. Much of the *work of narrative*, from autobiography to national history, is making jumps across maps continuous, filling in gaps within maps, making circuitous paths straight and, in general, projecting telos onto aimlessness, and order onto chaos.

2. INSTRUMENTAL VALUES: DETERMINING RELATIVE DESIRABILITY WITHIN MUNDANE DOMAINS

It is useful to review the relation between desire, value, preference, and choice. In particular, we need to distinguish between first-order desires (or 'wants') and second-order desires (or 'preferences'). Desires are desires are desires: sometimes they are insanely complicated; sometimes they are brutally simple. Nothing more will be said about them here. Second-order desires, however, are at the heart of value. In particular, given a set of desirable things, we need a way to determine the relative desirability of any two things within the set. As used here, *values are not desires; values are a means of determining relative desirability*.[4] They might be likened to logic underlying preferences (qua mental attitudes), or a standard underlying choices (qua observable behaviors).

For micro-economists, the preference process is often imagined to go like this.[5] Take a set of options. For example, whatever is available on the dessert menu: apple pie, ice

cream, and banana pudding. Pair-wise compare all the options within the set, assigning one of three relations (more desirable, less desirable, equally desirable). For example, apple pie is more desirable than ice cream, banana pudding is less desirable than apple pie, and ice cream and banana pudding are equally desirable. Given such a set of relations, choose the most desirable option out of the set of available options. For example, 'I'll have the apple pie, please.' By determining relatively desirability, values can establish preferences over a set; and once such preferences are established, the highest ranked option may be chosen.

So what are some ways of weighing relative desirability, such that preferences over a set may be determined? The most famous one underlies utility functions: map a domain of options onto a range of numbers, such that preference relations may be framed in terms of relative magnitudes or ordinal rankings. For example, if one knows the calorie content of each dessert on the menu, and if one is trying to maximize the calories one consumes, one may treat the numerical relation 'greater than' (>) as the preference relation 'more desirable than', and so on for 'less than' (<) and 'equal to' (=). Thus, one finds apple pie more desirable than the other options because it has more calories than the other options (all other things being equal). Other relative magnitudes onto which preferences relations within this domain may be mapped include: price, protein, chocolate to carbohydrate ratio, saturated fat, and so on.

Weber would call such utility-based evaluative techniques *instrumentally rational*.[6] For domains other than dessert menus, the instrumental values underlying preferences may be tied to price, efficiency, time, energy, volume, probability, profit, and so forth. As is well known, there is a huge amount of labor that goes into making any domain amenable to instrumentally rational values. We need standardized numbers (three dozen, two giga-), standardized units (bushel, byte), and standardized substances (wheat, information). And we need a single dimension, or weighted set of dimensions, relative to which such a domain of standardized options may be mapped, so that relative magnitudes along this dimension may be treated as preference relations. For example, not only do we need to agree on what calories are, and how to measure them, but we also have to have measured how many calories each of our options has. But once we have such standards and dimensions, any set of options is easily enough managed that an automaton can choose for us.

3. INSTRUMENTALLY RATIONAL MAPS

So how does this understanding of instrumental values relate to maps, terrains, and travelers? To say a map projects a set of values, or enables evaluation, is to say that, by indicating secondary properties of places, a map allows a traveler to weigh the relative desirability of different paths through, and different destinations in, the same terrain. In particular, given an origin, which enables a set of paths to a set of destinations, a map should allow one to compare any two paths (qua means), or any two destinations (qua ends), and rate one relative to the other as more desirable, less desirable, or equally desirable.

For example, suppose a traveler is at a particular place (qua origin) within a terrain that is suitably standardized and dimensionalized. Then the relative desirability of possible destinations may be determined by a utility function. In physical space, which bar has the strongest martini; in social space, which trade has the highest pay. And, once the most desired destination is chosen, the relative desirability of possible paths to that

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destination may be determined by a utility function. In real space, which route is the fastest; in social space, whose apprenticeship is the shortest.[7] In other words, if the terrain to be navigated is amenable to an instrumentally-rational mapping, then *the secondary properties of places might be reduced to the multidimensional equivalent of gradients and contours*: any two places on the same contour are equally desirable; any place higher on a gradient is more desirable; and any place lower on a gradient is less desirable. Life would consist of trying to climb as high as one can.

While this vision of life may seem a long way from social relations and cognitive representations, it should be remembered that property rights are just a certain kind of social status. To own a use-value (say, a pair of shoes), or an exchange-value (say, $5.00), is to have rights to, and responsibilities for, the item in question. That is, to inhabit such a property status, by having such a possession, is to have a say in how such a use-value is used, or what such an exchange-value is exchanged for. In some sense, then, whenever one is confronted with a set of options (of the instrumental kind just described – from dessert menus to mutual funds), what one is really opting for is one social status over another: whether to give up one's use-rights to $5.00 in exchange for use-rights to banana pudding or use-rights to apple pie. In other words, any domain of options, no matter how instrumentally rational, is actually a domain of social relations: one does not so much acquire the item of possession itself as one acquires others' recognition of one's rights to, and responsibilities for, the object in question (Kockelman, 2007).

Crucially, in the case of exchange-values, the rights and responsibilities in question are abstract and quantified. They are abstract because my property right to an exchange-value of $5.00 may be transformed into a property right to any use-value currently on the market that has such an exchange-value. And they are quantifiable because your property right to an exchange-value of $25.00 provides you with five times the abstract right as my property right to an exchange-value of $5.00. It is precisely these properties of abstraction and quantification that allow such social relations, qua proprietary statuses, to be treated in terms of standards and dimensions.

Moreover, an economic transaction is identical in function to a performative utterance: the participants must already hold certain social statuses (qua properties rights) for the transaction to be appropriate; and the participants must come to hold certain social statuses (qua properties rights) for the transaction to be effective. One gives up one's right to $5.00 at the same time one acquires a right to banana pudding. And one does this using more or less explicit signs: from pointing to an item on a dessert menu to raising one's hand at an auction; from bringing a grocery cart up to the check-out counter to clicking on a 'purchase item' icon.

In short, it is relatively easy to treat the circulation of use-values and exchange-values in terms of meaning and modality, and thus to frame instrumentally rational techniques of evaluation in terms of social relations. Indeed, one can easily imagine a mapping in which all positions in a terrain are reduced to proprietary statuses: abstract and quantified rights and responsibilities to use or exchange various items of possession, with movements through the terrain being effected by economic transactions.

Finally, just as social relations may be instrumentally rational, so may cognitive representations: we can assess exactly how much one should desire something (usually via price), and exactly how much one should believe something (usually via probability). And the two of these together, in the sense of expected utility (a sum over the product

of price and probability), allows one to make decisions. When the terrain is unknown or unstable, this may be the best way to minimize the risk of one's travels. The trouble is, as most clearly seen by Peirce, that one only gets one life to make a choice, whereas such calculations are only valid when made across an infinite number of lives, akin to an infinite number of throws of a die. In other words, there is no better example of the *single case objection* than life itself, a die we each get to roll only once.[8]

4. EXISTENTIAL VALUES: DETERMINING RELATIVE DESIRABILITY WITHIN NON-MUNDANE TERRAINS

But evaluative techniques need not be instrumentally rational, and so Weber theorized a wider range of evaluative techniques (1978: 24–5). Some are *traditionally rational*: the logic underlying our preferences makes sense for us because it made sense for those who came before us.[9] I habitually order banana pudding because my father ordered it before me. Some are *affectively rational*: our choices make sense given the fact that we were drunk or depressed, high or lonely, manic or sad, vengeful or horny, when we made them.[10] And some are *value rational*: our understanding of the relative desirability of two options makes sense because of some aesthetic, ethical, or religious ideal. Such ideals make unconditional demands on us; and we value them for their own sake, independently of our prospects for success. Weber's description of this last type is worth quoting at length:

> Examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible costs to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some 'cause' no matter in what it consists. (1978: 25)

Each of these four evaluative techniques was an ideal type for Weber. Any actual decision, any sociohistorically contextualized choice, may involve aspects of each of them. And any actual person may use all of these at different points in life, or in different domains of choice. In some sense, then, our maps are *existentially rational*: not only allowing for a range of evaluative techniques, but even delimiting those regions within a terrain in which one technique is more appropriate than another. For example, regions to which instrumental rationality is restricted; regions in which we should let our hearts lead us rather than our minds; and regions in which ingrained habit is the best guide. Moreover, any of the other techniques may become value-rational: we may consciously adhere to tradition for the sake of tradition; or we may consciously pursue or follow affective experiences for their own sake. Indeed, we may even value calculation, and profit maximization, as a moral course. For example, as Weber saw it, the Protestant ethic, as a kind of value-rationality, was precisely an injunction to follow an instrumental rationality: a ethical duty to increase one's capital through rational calculation. Or, to go back to Peirce, who cares what number actually comes up so long as I die knowing I made the rational choice.

(Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality is very similar to what Charles Taylor (1985) calls weak and streak evaluation. By *weak evaluation*, Taylor means a type of value that turns on the qualities of an action or its outcome – qualities such as efficiency and cost. And by *strong evaluation*, he means a type of value

that turns on the motivation for the action or the qualities of the actor – criteria such nobility and dignity. As Taylor phrases it, 'strong evaluation is concerned with the qualitative *worth* of different desires' (p. 16).)

Notwithstanding the range of evaluative techniques we have access to, it is only instrumental rationality that is clearly and precisely theorized. The entire discipline of economics is devoted to it; and social scientists and critical theorists of all persuasions have described its excesses and limitations. For the purposes of this essay, what is important is to show how travelers may navigate certain regions within a terrain by means of maps which turn on it. This was the topic of the last two sections. In contrast, existential value – and especially value-rationality – while long considered the essence of what it means to be human, has not received such a precise and positive formulation. While it is easy to assert how important it is, and to enumerate examples of its content, it is very difficult to give an analytically precise and empirically tractable account of its structure and function. The next section focuses on this topic; and, in some sense, this entire essay is devoted to its explication.

5. WEIGHING RELATIVE DESIRABILITY BY REFERENCE TO PROTOTYPIC AND EXEMPLARY PATHS

In the domain of semantics, many linguists and psychologists long ago gave up trying to account for the meaning of words in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.[11] Thus, while one may try to define the meaning of the word *water* as H_2O, speakers may actually represent its meaning as a prototype: say, a colorless, tasteless liquid that is good to drink. Similarly, while we may try to define the meaning of the word *uncle* as first-generation, ascending, male collineal relative, speakers may actually represent its meaning as an exemplar: say, one's beloved uncle Willie. To decide whether something could be the referent of the word *water*, or someone could be the referent of the word *uncle*, we see whether it has properties that are similar to our prototype of water, or to our exemplar of uncle.

Insofar as prototypes and exemplars have many properties, and insofar as most of these properties are difficult to quantify, unitize, and standardize, the similarity metric we use to decide which of two things is more like water, or which of two people is more like an uncle, is quite unlike the utility metric we (allegedly) use to decide which of two options is more desirable. Thus, while we may be able to say whether one thing is more or less colorless or more or less tasteless than another, it is difficult to say how much more colorless or how much more tasteless it is. And while we may be able to say whether one man is more like our beloved uncle Willie than another, it is difficult to say how much more like our uncle he is.[12] Moreover, in different contexts, we may weight one property more than another in making our decision: when we have a cold, tastelessness is not as good a measure as colorlessness; when it is dark, colorlessness is not as good a measure as tastelessness; and so on. In short, if meaning turns on prototypes and exemplars, relative similarity judgments should be qualitative (more or less, but not how much more or how much less), multidimensional (more or less colorless, more or less tasteless, more or less good to drink, etc.), and contextual (under some conditions more, under other conditions less).

To get back to the concerns of this essay, then, the key claim is this: *one weighs the relative desirability of possible paths by comparing them to a set of prototypic or exemplary*

paths. Such paths may be long: what is the entire life-path of a righteous man? Such paths may be short: what would a righteous man do when faced with some particular decision? Such paths may be exemplary: our sense of the life choices made by some particular, and particularly memorable, individual (who we 'identity with'). Such paths may be prototypic: a melding together in our minds of the paths of different relatively righteous individuals. Depending on our current position (as an origin), and our current purview (as to scale), we may use different prototypes and exemplars to determine which path to take, and which destination to get to.

Moreover, our prototypes and exemplars are often grounded in decisions made in radically different terrains. For example, the world my father lived in, and thus the terrain through which he traveled, may be more or less like my own. And thus the best model for my current actions may not be how my father handled himself during the boom, but how my grandfather handled himself during the bust. That is, not only do we have to decide which of two paths is more like the exemplar or prototype, but we also have to decide which of two exemplars or prototypes is most germane to this terrain.

To be sure, the models we use, the prototypes and exemplars we deploy, circulate via social, semiotic, and material processes. Our models may be taken from relatively widespread anecdotes and stories, novels and movies; and they may be adopted from relatively narrow memories, or personal experiences. *To study existential rationality is to study the long-durée genealogy and circulation of prototypes and exemplars over history and across a population, as much as the real-time deployment and refinement of such models by any contextually-situated individual in making an actual decision.* Perhaps the works of Agha (2003), Cepek (2008a, 2008b), Guyer (2004), and Silverstein (2004), at once fiercely theoretical and deeply empirical, most clearly resonate with these ideas.

To be sure, instrumental rationality has a very large say in enabling and constraining circulation – such models may be disclosed and enclosed: not just explicated and incul-cated, but also packaged and priced. My behavior under fire is just as likely to be determined by my having heard grandpa's war stories as by my having watched *Saving Private Ryan*. In making any decision, or passing on any model, it is never entirely clear whether morality or money, custom or emotion, has the upper hand.

In sum, our map is not so much a framework as a patchwork, not instrumental but existential, not monochromatic but kaleidoscopic. Depending on the immediate terrain, our position in it, and the scope of our purview, we may use different prototypes and exemplars to frame the relative desirability of possible paths and destinations. And in deciding which path to take (relative to an exemplar or prototype), or which exemplar or prototype to use (relative to a terrain), we make judgments that are qualitative, multidimensional, and contextual.

Finally, it is not just the case that our maps are existential rather than instrumental (the former including the latter as a special case), but that the instrumental parts are grounded in prototypic and exemplary models – but now of numbers, units, and utilities (be it three bushels of wheat or three euros of money), as well as the transactional frames and equivalence scales for converting these.

6. WHAT KINDS OF AGENCY DO WE HAVE OVER MAPS?

Within the confines of the ongoing metaphor – value as a relation between maps, terrains, and travelers – we may inquire into the relation between value and agency.

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Agency itself may be broadly understood in terms of flexibility and accountability. On the one hand, the more we have a say in what ends we vie for, and what means we vie with, the more agency we have. And, on the other hand, the greater our agency over an action or event, the greater our accountability for that action or event. The values underlying an identity are thereby important because by guiding our actions they enable and constrain our agency. We have so far been focused on how maps enable agency (loosely speaking, they give us a means to make choices); and we may now inquire into our agency over maps (loosely speaking, what choice do we have over our means of making choices).

To begin to answer this question, we may paraphrase Francis Bacon: if the task of power is to super-induce on a given individual or collectivity a new map, the task of knowledge is to find for a given map the source of its coming-to-be. In the limited sense in which it is being used here, then, power turns on the creation and composition of a map; and knowledge turns on the explication and interpretation of a map.[13] While these are separated here, it should be emphasized that knowledge and power, as two modes of agency, go hand-in-hand: our ability to 'gauge' our paths is concomitant with our ability to 'guide' our paths.

The more power one has, in this sense, the more one is able to determine the means by which one weighs relative desirability. In certain cases, this may have minor effects: one may use either price or time for the dimension; one may use one's uncle Willie or one's aunt Mary for the exemplar. In other cases, this may have major effects: one may use instrumental or existential reasoning in some region; one may use Christianity or Scientology as one's map. Indeed, once a set of maps exists – an infinite number of distinct religious texts, philosophical viewpoints, famous biographies, and historical personages (not to mention an endless number of idiosyncratic mishmashes of prototypes and exemplars) – we can inquire into one's agency over the map at issue. Have we accepted the first map we were offered? Do we mix and match, one part of our map from this source and another from that source? Or did we invent the map wholesale?[14]

The more knowledge one has, in this sense, the more one is able to articulate, or make public and unambiguous, the values underlying an identity. Part of the issue is to bring an embodied topography into relief, so that it may be treated as a mental map, or even as a canonical text – or, at the very least, to describe one or more exemplars and prototypes. And part of the issue is to be able to articulate where the values came from, historically, or why we should follow them, rationally. Stereotypically, this may involve disclosing values in a public setting, arguing for them, and communicating such values and arguments to others. More likely, it may involve telling stories in which models of action are animated and voiced. Such a process is not at all trivial: while such values are the ground of all interpretation, they are rarely a figure to be interpreted. Indeed, while being-in-the-world always already embodies such a set of values, beings in the world barely and rarely articulate them: the key to our residence is difficult to represent – partially because existential values are contextual, multidimensional, and qualitative.[15]

Leading to such representational agency may be any number of processes. For example, think of the 'life crises' that lead us to reevaluate our moral frameworks. Think of the 'disturbances' that arise when one's framework breaks down. Think of 'scientific' attempts to provide a framework: from rational-choice theory to utilitarianism. Indeed, once textualized – the semiotic objectification of a 'mental map' – frameworks have an

artificed quality: they can be bought, stolen, forged, translated, mass-produced, preserved, lost, stained, and so forth. Indeed, just as one can inscribe the purpose of life on a grain of rice (e.g. 'look no further'), one can get a great price on the good life.

Finally, returning to the limit of what we can choose or articulate, there is what Taylor has called 'radical choice' (1988) – the question of whether we could choose not to have any values at all, or whether we could describe the path taken by such a traveler.[16] Most attempts to do this – nihilism being the most famous example – are easily shown to be grounded in some value, and so don't really count. Indeed, Taylor has not only argued that to have contradictory or fleeting values is to have no character, he has also argued that to have no values at all is not to be human.

However, many famous figures from literature approach this limit, and this is precisely the quality that makes them compelling: Ulrich in Musil's *The Man without Qualities*; Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger*; Bartleby in Melville's *Bartleby the Schrivner*; Michael K in Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*, and so on. Most of these characters, however, never actually choose not to have values, they were just odd, marginal, or pathological enough to have never really had values in the first place. Thus, it is not that they were so agentive that they chose not to have agency; it is rather that they were so defective that they were never really agents originally. To take a phrase from Plato, we might characterize such a being as *tribeless, lawless, and heartless*. To borrow a metaphor from Aristotle, such a being might be compared to *an isolated piece at draughts*.

Radical agency is therefore a limit case – the case of a being who is agentive enough to have given up its own agency. Suicide – in the sense of killing one's *bios* rather than killing one's *zoe*, or tearing away one's map and thereby rendering meaningless a terrain – may be its only real instantiation.

7. CONCLUSION: MAPS ARE PATCHWORKS RATHER THAN FRAMEWORKS

While one might be tempted to think that the overarching metaphor of this essay is forced, inapt or overblown, consider Dante as the topographer of heaven, purgatory, and hell – providing later generations with a physical map, or textual artifact, of where various paths through a space of social relations and cognitive representations may lead. For example, where exactly is the final destination of the path taken by misers, gluttons, lovers, heroes, poets, liars, heretics, moneylenders, and politicians? To this day one could still plan one's life by following Dante's poem – though one would have to reinterpret its relation to modern terrains.[17]

More generally, most great works of art, philosophy, religion, law, and fiction provide such a framework. For example, one can orient oneself using Leopold Bloom's day in Dublin or de Sade's 1001 Days of Sodom, Beowulf's battles or Ulysses' journeys, a southern culture's code of honor or an Ivy League college's honor code, the autobiography of either Gandhi or Malcolm X, Saint-Exupery's Little Prince or Machiavelli's (Big) Prince, the Tanach or the Koran, Lincoln's speeches or Christ's sermons, Fat Freddy's Cat or Ayn Rand's Objectivism, Das Kapital or the Wealth of Nations.

Indeed, given the plethora of accessible texts, and given that one may just as easily embody such a text (as an ensemble of norms) as be able to cite such a text (as a list of rules), our maps are truly patchworks rather than frameworks – each swatch culled from a different source, their edges ragged, their origins now obscure. There are rips and tears,

burst seams and sturdy stitches, sections still visible, and pieces only palpable. For example, in Gramsci's ashes you will find his heritage and heirs at different degrees of remove – not only Machiavelli and Marx, but also Pasolini and Malcolm X; not only Lenin and Croce, but also Williams and Negri – indeed, maybe even Peter Singer and Saint Francis of Assisi. And as a tree consumed by flames will leave only its roots and fruits, after we die such patchworks are usually all that remains. Yet, nevertheless, in life they cling to us as comfortably and as unconsciously as a favorite shirt or suit – such a palimpsest constituting a second skin, such an embodied sign creating our sense of self.

Notes

1 Critiques of orienteering metaphors, their relation to orientalism, and so forth, are well-known, and so will not be rehearsed here.

2 Kockelman (2006) treats the relation between identities and roles, as well as the relation of these to affordances, instruments, and actions.

3 Like any real map of any physical terrain, maps may be drawn to different scales: more or less detail may be shown; more or less social relations and cognitive representations may be delimited. In the context of this metaphor, the usual questions about mediation and performativity arise. Does the interpreter project features of the sign (qua map) onto the object (qua terrain), or was the sign iconically designed to have features in common with the object? More generally, maps may give rise to terrains (just as terms and concepts may drive categories); and terrains may give rise to maps (just as categories may drive concepts and terms). In a Peircean idiom, the terrain may be both a dynamic and immediate object of the map as sign, thereby relating to it as cause to effect or as effect to cause.

4 As Taylor (1985) phrases it, 'what is distinctly human is the power to evaluate our desires, to regard some as desirable and others as undesirable' (15–16; and see Frankfurt, 1971).

5 See, for example, Rubenstein (2006) and Varian (2006).

6 As he phrased it, people and things in the actor's environment are used as means for 'the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends' (1978: 24).

7 Choices might still exist: there might be a variety of standardized dimensions relative to which one may weigh the relative desirability of paths and destinations. Choice, then, would come down to choosing which dimension, or weighted set of dimensions, to use to determine relative desirability. Moreover, we might imagine using different dimensions at different positions in life, or in different regions of the terrain. And we might imagine terrains which are not yet subject to standardization and dimensionalization, such that other criteria, or no criteria, would have to apply.

8 As Peirce says, 'death makes the number of our risks, of our inferences, finite, and so makes their mean result uncertain. The very idea of probability and of reasoning rests on the assumption that this number is indefinitely great' (1955: 149).

9 As Weber put it, our action is 'determined by ingrained habituation' (1978: 25). This can shade into value-rationality if we consciously follow traditions for their own sake.

10 As Weber phrased it (1978: 25): 'action is affectual if it satisfies a need for revenge, sensual gratification, devotion, contemplative bliss, or for working off emotional

tensions (irrespective of sublimation)' (1978: 25). This shades into value-rationality if we consciously seek or follow affective experiences for their own sake.

11 See Taylor (1995) for a review. I am here boiling some of the ideas down to their essence for the sake of exposition. Also relevant are the stereotypes of Putnam (1975).

12 Such standards might exist; but they might not be publicly available; or one might have enough expertise to apply them.

13 These modes of agency should affect not only maps (qua signs), but also terrains (qua objects) and travelers (qua interpreters).

14 In one reading, Heidegger's distinction between authentic versus inauthentic Dasein can be read as an attempt to account for modes of life in which Dasein has taken a stand on the values that underlie its identity, or has been merely socialized into them: 'the existent Dasein can choose itself on purpose and determine its existence primarily and chiefly starting from that choice; that is, it can exist authentically. However, it can also let itself be determined in its being by others and thus exist inauthentically by existing primarily in forgetfulness of its own self' (1988[1975]: 170–71). To phrase this another way: most of us do not compose the values underlying our identity; some of us compose them, but merely by choosing from among a predetermined set; and a few folks even create the values themselves.

15 As Heidegger would put it: 'what is thus nearest to us ontically is exactly farthest from us ontologically' (1988[1975]: 155).

16 Loosely speaking, just as value was framed as second-order desire in Section 2, authenticity (qua agency over a map) may be framed as third-order desire (or second-order value), and radical choice may be framed as fourth-order desire (or second-order authenticity).

17 Just as interpreters of a nation's constitution or a religion's holy book would have to reevaluate its outdated and/or ancient ideas in light of new events and experiences (or not, as some would argue the case often is – thereby getting more and more lost with each successive generation).

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