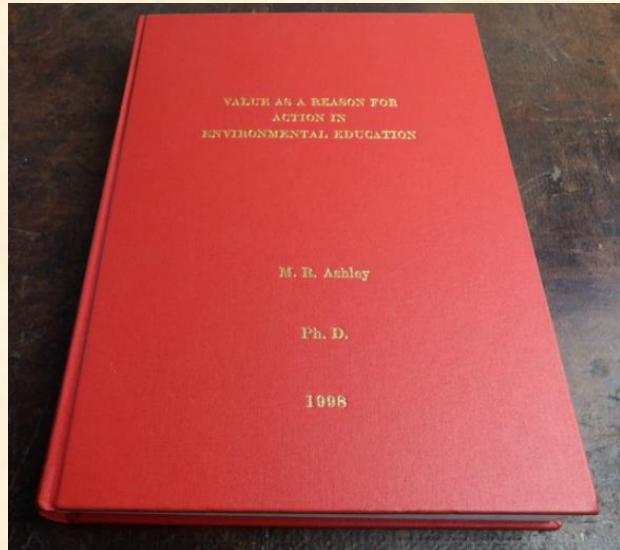


Value as a Reason for Action

What does it mean and what has been its significance?

Martin Ashley PhD

My PhD was awarded in 1998 and it's been a while since I consulted my own thesis. According to the abstract, I set out to "examine in some depth the psychological nature of values and attitudes, with an emphasis on the concept of weakness of will. Practical experience of action and the education and development of the emotions are seen to be important in the development of values and attitudes as well as the education of reason and the intellect."



I do not think I exaggerate when I state that values and attitudes of humans have become one of the most potent forces on the planet and the one most to be feared. Pause for a moment to consider the impact of a powerful world leader whose emotional level appears fundamentally similar to that of a small child and whose reasoning powers are reported to lack the capacity for judgment that comes from sufficient (or any) education of reason and intellect. Then reflect seriously on how it is possible in an advanced economy and democratic state for such a person to rise to such a position and you will realise what deep trouble the human race has got itself into.

In 1998 the trouble that particularly occupied my mind was environmental sustainability. It appeared to me then that the values and attitudes dominant in wealthier societies across the world were such that the planetary life support systems that had evolved over millennia were diminishing at an alarming rate. Naturally, as an educator I was curious to explore the values and attitudes of the children I was teaching. A better understanding of these seemed to me a prerequisite for the kind of curriculum and approach that would be necessary to achieve environmental sustainability, something of a new buzzword during the early 1990s. The children I was teaching at the time, born during the 1980s, have become known as Generation Y or the "Millennials". Now aged mostly in their forties, this generation is upcoming as the most active and dominant in business, commerce, industry and politics.

The results of my investigations were not promising. They predicted that this generation would not only fail to bring about environmental sustainability but would be net contributors to a worsening trend. The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), published in 2022, a gargantuan document of 3056 authoritative pages, provides all the evidence necessary to draw the conclusion that my predictions were correct.

Current development pathways, combined with the observed impacts of climate change, are leading away from, rather than towards, sustainable development, as reported in recent literature (moderate agreement, robust evidence).¹

How did I reach this apparently correct conclusion? My thesis and subsequent publications on the topic are there for anyone who cares to read them. Meanwhile I regularly console myself with the thought that I shall not live long enough to see where all this leads. I am troubled, though, by the fact that for all that I was saying to children thirty or more years ago, I say nothing now. Is this excusable? For one thing, dystopian environmentalism never did any good and I have learned that childhood and adolescence are not the right time. For another, I live in the hope that I might be wrong. People on soap boxes with End is Nigh placards traditionally have been.

Value, though, remains a reason for action and the kernel of the thesis. Searching for a post-doctoral project I returned to an interest that had preceded my interest in the environment – music, the subject I had actually qualified in as a teacher. I had abandoned the teaching of music in favour of geography and science precisely over an issue of values. I valued music of the renaissance and baroque. Most of the children I taught valued the latest chart music, and more to the point I valued the better relationships I found possible at that time through switching to the teaching of geography and science. It was out of this that the previously latent interest in environmental sustainability developed.

The move from the small market town where I had been teaching to the city where I gained employment as a university lecturer brought with it the opportunity to involve myself in church music once again, not as an organist and choir leader as previously but simply as a back row singer in an all-male choir of some repute. I began to question my earlier rejection of music teaching and started to wonder what motivated the boys to attend. A values based ethnographic study² produced a result that surprised me. It appeared that the boys did value the music and I had been in error previously to assume I would only recruit boys to my own choir through promises of football teams and pizza parties.

More to the point, publication of this study attracted a great deal more attention than my work on values and the environment. I lost count of how many times I was on national radio (and Australian radio) and also made CBBC and the local TV news. The term “research impact” had not then been brought into use but understandably I was encouraged to take the work further. My response was to apply for post-doctoral funding on the basis, not only of my PhD but at least as much as my previous MPhil where had I sought to understand why almost all disruptive classroom behaviour and academic underachievement was by boys. Now I wanted to know why, once again, it was mainly amongst the boys that negative attitudes existed to the singing I valued so highly as a classroom activity and in the cultural world beyond.

Research funders were sympathetic to my questions and I was granted a post-doctoral fellowship, effectively to look at the question of masculinity and the singing voice. The resultant monograph received the publisher’s award for “an outstanding contribution to scholarship” and more accessible books were soon to follow. Funders remained sympathetic and the topic of boys’ underrepresentation in choral singing received ready support. I put together a successful application for a project to work with the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain. As principal investigator I was to look at voice and identity, whilst my co-investigators, Dr Jenevora Williams and Professor David Howard were to look at vocal health and pedagogy, and the acoustics of voice respectively.

It was at this point that I lost sight of my original focus on value as a reason for action. I had been distracted by the obvious rift between cathedral music which, judging by my own criteria I appeared to value highly, and the work of researchers on the adolescent male voice such as Irvine Cooper and John Cooksey which appeared often in conflict with cathedral music. There are several publications on that topic, but in retrospect they are something of a distraction from the bigger and more fundamental question of intrinsic value.

So, here are two big questions to answer in the time that remains

- Is the intrinsic value of the natural world an illusion?
- Does cathedral music have intrinsic value?

¹ IPCC. (2022) *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA. P. 2652 doi:10.1017/97810093258442657

² Ashley, M. (2002) The Spiritual, the Cultural and the Religious: what can we learn from a study of boy choristers? *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 7 (3): 257 – 272.