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On the Formation, Renewal and Social Spillover of Value Structure: An Integrative Analytical Framework

DAO RAN ZOU

beihuzhiji@outlook.com

Guangzhou University

Article

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Abstract

This paper proposes an integrative analytical framework for describing how individual value judgments are formed, how they are transformed into sustained action, how they produce external effects in social interaction, and how new experience in turn updates existing cognitive models. Two premises are established: only a persisting subject can generate new first-person experience, and language faces a principled epistemic limit with respect to such experience. On this basis, the paper introduces the "main line of a life" and defines self-knowledge as the subject's ongoing modeling of its own value structure. The "incentive function" is introduced as a theoretical abstraction of value structure; the functions of desire, goals, presuppositions, and intuition are analyzed; and "goal self-containment" (a goal's definition includes the mode of action that sustains it) is proposed as a criterion for evaluating long-term stable goals. On the social dimension, the paper constructs the variable of mental regulatory load and discusses the "relative decoupling" between material conditions and mental states; on the cognitive dimension, it explains how new informational input drives the updating of cognitive models. The framework presupposes no a priori purpose of life; it aims to provide a set of analytical tools for the analysis of value generation, action choice, and social external effects.

1 Introduction: Value, Action, and the Question of Social Connection

Discussions of the meaning of life usually revolve around objects such as happiness, career, relationships, wealth, or social contribution. These objects may all be of great value, but they share one structural feature: their realized outcomes can in principle be obtained or taken over by different subjects. A profession can be succeeded by someone else; a cause can be continued by those who come later; a task can likewise be completed by a different subject. It is therefore necessary to distinguish two different questions: whether something has value, and whether something has an irreplaceable completer. This paper focuses on the second question and builds its subsequent analysis on that basis.

At the same time, a person's value judgments are not static. New experiences, new information, and feedback from social interaction can all change the overall structure of what a person "wants" and of how they "judge what is worth pursuing." If this structure keeps changing, we need a set of conceptual tools to explain the direction, conditions, and consequences of such change. More importantly, a person's action choices do not affect only themselves. When individuals act on their own value judgments, their behavior alters the resource conditions, mental load, and room for action of others. The study of value structure therefore cannot stop inside the individual; it must extend to the social level.

This paper thus poses an integrative question: how is an individual's value structure formed, how does it generate action, how does it produce external effects in social interaction, and how is it updated by new experience? Four separate essays have previously addressed different links of this chain of questions; this paper integrates them into a unified analytical framework.

The paper is structured as follows. Part 2 discusses the irreplaceability of the subject and the main line of a life; Part 3 defines the incentive function and analyzes its dynamic properties; Part 4 brings the incentive structure to the social level, discussing the externalities of mental load and their distribution; Part 5 analyzes how new information brings about structural updating of cognitive models; Part 6 summarizes the theoretical chain and discusses its scope of application.

Finally, one thing this paper deliberately refrains from doing must be stated. The core proposition of this paper is the irreplaceability of the subject in value construction, and this gives rise to a self-imposed constraint on the writing: this paper provides no concrete life content. If the author were to write his own completed value construction into the text, readers might take the author's answers as their own, bypassing the modeling process they must complete in person — in the language of Part 4, this would itself constitute an externality. The blanks throughout this paper are therefore not incompleteness but deliberate restraint: the framework provides tools only, not finished products.

For the same reason, this paper makes no unified assertion about the deep morphology of value structure. Some people's life narrative is that of "the prodigal's return" — the deep goal was present all along, only temporarily departed from; others' is that of "today, at last, I know that I am myself" — a rupture and a rebirth. Both kinds of experience genuinely exist, and from the first-person perspective they are hard to distinguish — nor need they be distinguished. Whether the deep structure is constant and how it evolves fall within each subject's own judgment; the present framework remains open to both.

1.1 Research Positioning and Relation to Existing Research

Before entering the main discussions, a brief account of this paper's position in the landscape of existing research is in order.

What this paper fills is a structural gap. Research on value and action is roughly distributed across three levels: normative theory discusses what one ought to pursue; descriptive research records what people actually pursue, together with the psychological and social mechanisms of pursuit; work at the meta-theoretical level analyzes the nature and structure of value judgment itself. Each level has accumulated substantial results. Yet few frameworks can handle four links at once — how an individual value structure is formed, how it is transformed into action, how it produces spillover effects in social interaction, and how it is updated by new experience — while presupposing no concrete value content for any of them. Existing integrative attempts mostly slide, at some link, into supplying normative content, whereas the present framework deliberately keeps the content blank at every link. This paper's attempt targets precisely this gap: to provide an integrative process framework rather than to add one more argument within a single level.

This paper is not an invention from scratch. Goal-setting theory's findings on the relation between concrete goals and sustained motivation, self-determination theory's distinction between intrinsic motivation and autonomy, the allostatic-load research tradition's approach to measuring the cumulative costs of chronic stress, social entropy theory's macro-level description of the degree of order in social

systems, the free-energy principle's way of modeling cognitive systems as minimizing surprise, and the minimum-description-length principle's methodological constraint on model simplicity have all inspired this paper to varying degrees. The paper's procedure is to absorb certain insights from the work above, detach them from their original disciplinary contexts and measurement systems, re-abstract them in de-particularized form, and recombine them along the question line of "formation—action—spillover—renewal." The relation between this paper and these theories is therefore one of borrowing and transformation, not competition or replacement; the specific points of borrowing are marked in the notes of the relevant chapters.

Compared with the resources above, the core feature of the present framework lies precisely in its self-limitation. First, the framework provides no concrete life content; the choice of value goals is left entirely to the subject. Second, the framework's normative premise is not an asserted truth but a worldview that each subject must actively "check" (as one checks a box); without that check, the relevant inferences are void for that subject. Third, the final authority to confirm any value judgment always remains with the holder of the first-person experience; no external observer, artificial intelligence included, can take over this position. These three constraints distinguish the framework from the "answer-giving" tendency common in current discourse on value: whether the answer comes in the form of a life coach, success literature, or algorithmic recommendation, the common feature is an attempt to complete, on the subject's behalf, the value construction that the subject should complete in person. The writing principle of this paper is a deliberate pushback against that tendency.

2 The Irreplaceability of the Subject and the Main Line of a Life

2.1 Two Basic Premises

This paper begins with two theoretical premises. First, continued existence is a necessary condition for acquiring new first-person experience. This premise does not mean that being alive has already proved all the value of a life; it only points out that as long as a task depends on the subject's continued acquisition of feelings, experiences, and material for reflection, the subject's continued existence is its necessary condition. Second, language faces a principled epistemic limit. Even if a subject can describe its own experience with great accuracy, no other subject possesses an ultimate criterion that is completely independent of first-person experience. There is therefore no way to prove that one person has obtained an experience exactly identical to another's. This does not deny the effectiveness of communication; it points out that first-person experience cannot in principle be completely taken over by a third party [1, 2].

2.2 The Main Line and the Branch Lines of a Life

This paper defines the "main line of a life" as a task satisfying three conditions: first, the task takes the subject's continued existence as a necessary condition; second, the final completer of the task is irreplaceable; third, the subject-status of the task is non-transferable. The third condition needs special clarification: non-transferability of subject-status does not mean that the subject must possess fully

independent practical ability. A person may rely on language, education, care, or tools to complete a task, but as long as these external factors ultimately cannot replace their position as the subject of the task, the task remains irreplaceable. "Independence" here is therefore independence in the sense of subject-status, not independence in the sense of practical ability.

A "branch line of a life" refers to a task that likewise takes the subject's continued existence as a condition and possesses subject-irreplaceability, but requires the simultaneous presence of another concrete subject. Main lines and branch lines are, first of all, a distinction in task structure, not a distinction in value ranking.

2.3 A Normative Premise and Its Scope of Application

This paper introduces an independent normative premise: the main lines of all individuals' lives have equal normative value. It must be emphasized that this premise is not a logically necessary fact, nor an empirical law, but a value choice. It has normative force only when a subject actively accepts it — this acceptance can be understood as an active "check": without the check, this paper's normative inferences are void for that subject; once checked, they become binding. The later discussions of interaction between persons therefore constitute behavioral guidance only among subjects who accept this premise; for subjects who do not accept it, this paper claims no universal binding force.

On this basis, if an act of rescue restores another subject's realistic opportunity to continue their own main line, and if we acknowledge that the continuation of a main line has normative value, then the act of rescue has corresponding instrumental value. Rescue requires the simultaneous presence of rescuer and rescued; at the same time, when the threat of death is sufficiently urgent, there is usually no other substitutable actor within the effective window of action, and the rescuer at hand thus satisfies the irreplaceability required of a branch line. Rescue therefore belongs to the branch-line structure. It must be frankly admitted that this irreplaceability can be neither verified nor falsified — the event is unique, the past cannot be replayed, and no control is possible; it is an undecidable proposition within the boundaries of human cognition. Nor is the whole normative inference a logically necessary conclusion; it is built upon an explicit value choice.

2.4 Self-Knowledge as a Task Only the Subject Can Complete

What this paper means by self-knowledge is not a list of personality labels, nor a static description of character traits. It is an ongoing process of self-modeling by the subject: the individual takes feelings, actions, desires, choices, and historical experience as material, and tries to find the relatively stable value structure behind this material. The process ultimately involves two core questions: what do I truly pursue, and by what standard do I judge that a state or an action has higher or lower value for me.

Self-knowledge first satisfies life-dependence — as long as the process still requires new experiential material, the subject's continued existence is a necessary condition. Second, self-knowledge has non-transferable subjectivity: others can provide observations about the subject, can help organize

experience, and can propose interpretations, but what ultimately must be judged is what these experiences mean for the subject and how they enter the subject's own value structure. It should be noted that the ground of this irreplaceability is not the epistemic fact itself that "others cannot fully understand the subject," but the non-transferability of the subject-status of final confirmation and revision. Others can therefore participate in a person's self-knowledge, but cannot replace the subject as the final confirmer and reviser of its own value structure.

3 The Incentive Function: A Dynamic Model of Value Structure

3.1 Defining the Incentive Function

This paper uses "incentive function" to name the overall structure by which a subject assigns value to possible states and forms tendencies to act. "Function" here is a theoretical abstraction, not a mathematical formula that must be presupposed to really exist in the brain. What it expresses is: starting from situations and possible states, how the subject assigns value, and how this assignment generates tendencies to act.

Whether the incentive function is constant, and how it evolves, varies from person to person and is for each subject to judge. The subject constantly acquires new experience and constantly reinterprets existing experience; the subject's self-model is therefore closer to a dynamically updating structure. Past experience can influence current preferences but cannot automatically determine current choices; current choices in turn form new experience and further influence the future value structure. Self-knowledge is thus not a matter of first obtaining a complete model and then living according to it, but of continually revising the model in the course of living.

3.2 Desire, Goal States, and the Structure of Aspiration

Everyday language often expresses desire as an object — wealth, a position, or success, for example — but the object and the goal state are not always the same. A person who pursues wealth may do so because wealth is seen as a condition of security, freedom, or a sense of control. Another person may hope that a certain truth is discovered — not because the truth would directly increase their comfort, but because "knowing the truth" is itself the state they pursue. This paper therefore defines desire as the subject's positive value assignment to some possible state. That state may belong to the subject itself or to the external world beyond the subject. External objects are usually conditions the subject believes can bring about that state, but not all desires need to be defined through one's own psychological states. This definition allows the paper to avoid reducing all desire to psychological hedonism.

An "aspirational action" is an action the subject performs in order to bring about some future state; an "aspirational outcome" is the future state the subject tries to realize. The two are causally connected but not structurally identical. A person acquires a qualification through study — study is the aspirational action, the qualification the aspirational outcome. Once the qualification has been obtained, the instrumental role originally carried by the action of studying may decline. A change of motivation after a

goal is realized therefore does not mean that the previous goal was meaningless, nor that a decline of motivation is necessarily a negative phenomenon. It only shows that the action mechanism that realizes an outcome is not necessarily contained within the outcome itself.

3.3 Goal Self-Containment

If a person's goal structure depends mainly on "finally obtaining some result," then once the result is realized, the necessity of the original behavior may decline. This produces a common dynamic: a goal is formed, pursued over time, realized; the original motivation declines; a new goal is formed. This process itself does not necessarily have to be evaluated as a problem — a way of life can perfectly well consist of a series of continually completed goals.

What this paper is really concerned with is another situation: the subject tries to build a long-term, continuous value structure, yet repeatedly mistakes the final result for the whole of value, so that each realization of a goal causes the collapse of the original motivational structure. To address this, the paper proposes "goal self-containment": for an enduring goal, its definition includes not only the desired result but also the mode of action that keeps the result in existence. For example, if a person regards health as a long-term goal, then health is not merely the readings of one particular examination, but also the way of life that maintains the state of health over the long term. The result-structure of a stable goal should therefore contain, to a certain degree, the behavior that produces and maintains that result.

This proposition does not say that all life goals must be stable, still less that replacing goals is necessarily harmful. It only points out that if what the subject pursues is a continuous value structure, then a goal that depends entirely on a one-off result easily loses its own basis for action once the result is realized [3, 4].

3.4 Presupposition and Intuition

Real-world judgment is always made under conditions of incomplete information. If the subject had to wait until all information was obtained before acting, a great many actual decisions could never occur. The subject therefore needs presuppositions. This paper defines a presupposition as a hypothesis used, under conditions of incomplete information, to temporarily narrow the range of interpretation, form a direction for action, and reduce cognitive costs. The value of presuppositions comes from efficiency, and their risk comes from efficiency as well — a provisionally valid hypothesis, if mistakenly promoted to an unmodifiable truth, may force new experience to be interpreted again and again as an exception to the original system.

A presupposition is reasonable not because it is forever correct, but because it can be revised when new evidence appears. When new experience conflicts with the current model, the subject can first revise local interpretations; if local revisions keep accumulating and deeper conflicts appear within the system, the more reasonable course is to re-examine the original presuppositions. Cognitive maturity therefore does not consist in possessing an initial judgment that never changes, but in having sufficiently low "presupposition stickiness."

Intuition can be understood as a mechanism for rapidly generating presuppositions. Long-term experience forms, inside the subject, a large number of compressed patterns, so that in many situations a person can quickly form a judgment without reasoning from scratch. This ability can reduce cognitive costs, but the efficiency of intuition does not amount to absolute correctness. Efficient judgment in a familiar environment may fail in an environment whose structure has changed. Intuition is therefore best understood as a high-efficiency initial model, not as an ultimate source of truth.

4 The Social Level: Externalities and Distribution of Mental Load

4.1 Defining the Analytical Variable

This paper introduces a social-level analytical variable to describe the states of individuals and groups with respect to material conditions, mental load, and the conversion relation between the two. It should be made clear that this is not entropy in the thermodynamic sense, nor a natural entity that can already be measured independently, but an artificially constructed theoretical variable. Its reasonableness depends on whether a unified conceptual structure can explain several interrelated social phenomena.

This name has appeared before in other theories [5], so the paper claims no originality for the name and instead emphasizes a different theoretical focus: this paper is mainly concerned with individual mental regulatory load and its social externalities, and with the interaction between material states and mental states. At the same time, research on social anomie and stress research on allostatic load provide two theoretically neighboring objects for the present analysis [6, 7].

4.2 Mental Regulatory Load

This paper no longer treats anxiety, unease, or cognitive confusion as directly one and the same variable. A person can be emotionally very anxious while possessing a highly structured worldview at the cognitive level; one can also possess a highly complex structure of thought while remaining relatively calm. The core concept of this paper is therefore defined as the overall mental regulatory load that a subject bears in order to maintain its own goal states, handle environmental uncertainty, and regulate social relations. Anxiety, persistent conflict, and uncertainty can be sources of this load, but they are not themselves synonyms of the load.

This concept is related to "allostatic load" in stress research, but the two are still different: allostatic load has a well-defined physiological research tradition, whereas the analytical variable of this paper remains, for now, an analytical tool in philosophy and social theory [7].

4.3 The Relation Between Material Conditions and Mental Load

This paper proposes a weak empirical hypothesis: material conditions can influence mental states to a certain degree, but the influence is not a simple linear relation. When a subject is in a state of severe resource scarcity, basic material improvement may bring very significant mental gains; once basic needs

are gradually met, the marginal gain from continuing to add the same resources may decline [8]. Material conditions do not directly determine mental states — the same income, housing, or social resources may have different effects on different subjects. This paper therefore introduces the concept of "material-to-mental conversion" to describe how a subject transforms external resources into the stability, satisfaction, or security it pursues.

However, there is a strict theoretical limit here: if "conversion capacity" could unconditionally explain every anomaly, the theory would lose testability. Conversion capacity can therefore serve only as a theoretical variable for now, not as an all-purpose explanation.

An individual's mental state is not something that can only increase and never recover. Subjects have the capacities of adaptation, habituation, reinterpretation, and recovery. A more reasonable proposition is therefore: under conditions of persistent stimulation, long-term uncertainty, or the absence of effective regulatory mechanisms, mental regulatory load may accumulate; at the same time, recovery mechanisms in the subject and the environment may also reduce this load. This model allows both directions to exist at once, and is thus a dynamic concept rather than one of necessarily one-way growth.

4.4 Externalities of States and Their Social Distribution

Individuals are not closed systems. Speech, behavior, resource allocation, organizational institutions, and interpersonal relations can all change the states of other subjects. A person's incentive structure therefore not only determines their own actions but may also produce externalities for those around them. For example, long-term uncertainty in an organization may be created by one person yet borne by the whole team; a certain way of allocating resources may reduce one subject's mental load while transferring risk to another. A social system consists not only of individual states, but also of the transfer of states between subjects.

Power has two main directions of action within this framework: discursive power enlarges the reach of information, interpretive frames, and emotional states; material power changes resource distribution, behavioral constraints, and institutional conditions. But the two are not mutually exclusive — discursive power may well change material allocation, and material power may well generate enormous mental pressure.

Morality can be understood, to a certain degree, as society's normative mechanism for the externalities of behavior. If a kind of behavior persistently imposes unnecessary psychological burdens on others, society may gradually form normative evaluations targeting it. But it does not follow that all behavior that displeases others constitutes a moral problem — mental states are highly subjective. What social theory really needs to attend to are patterns of behavior that are repeatable, structured, and have stable external effects.

The advantage of law lies in its ability to handle infringements whose boundaries are relatively clear and whose evidence is relatively easy to form, such as property loss, personal injury, and explicit breach of contract. Mental harm is far more complex — bullying, manipulation, humiliation, and long-term relational

control can produce real consequences, but their boundaries of responsibility and causal relations are usually harder to determine. The law's limited coverage of the mental domain can therefore be understood in part as a result of the costs of measurement, proof, and adjudication, and need not be directly attributed to institutional indifference to mental problems.

Traditional class theory focuses mainly on wealth, income, occupation, and institutional power. This paper attempts to add a supplementary dimension: whether there are structural differences in different groups' capacity to bear state load. One group may long bear higher resource risk and mental regulatory costs, while another group possesses more buffering mechanisms. If such a relation persists over the long term, then class differences are manifested not only as wealth gaps, but also as asymmetries in state costs and state-buffering capacity.

4.5 The Relative Decoupling of Material Conditions and Mental States

If a subject builds all of its mental stability on external material conditions, then changes in resources may be directly converted into changes in mental state. Conversely, if the subject has already built a part of its value structure relatively independent of external resources, the influence of changes in material conditions on the overall mental state may weaken. This paper calls this relation the "relative decoupling of material conditions and mental states" — the word "relative" is very important here. It does not mean that the subject is no longer affected by poverty, disease, or resource constraints; it only means that external resources no longer serve as the sole determining variable of the subject's mental value. This proposition connects individual value structure with social analysis: how an individual constructs its own value structure changes its sensitivity to changes in external resources.

5 Cognitive Renewal: How Information Changes Value Structure

5.1 The Asymmetry Between Input Scale and Impact Scale

Input into a complex cognitive system does not necessarily produce results proportional to the scale of the input. The mechanism chain can be made explicit: information changes the cognitive model, the cognitive model changes the incentive structure, and the incentive structure changes behavior. A very short piece of information, if it changes the way the subject understands past experience — that is, if it acts on the first link of the chain — may then travel along the chain and further change the subject's later judgments, choices, and actions. How much impact an informational input ultimately has therefore depends on which link of the chain it acts upon; it cannot be judged by the scale of the input alone. At the same time, every link of the chain is subject to a simplicity constraint: a change that can be explained with fewer links should not be explained by introducing more. This paper calls this a description of change in cognitive models: originally scattered experience begins to acquire a higher degree of organization. It should be emphasized that this is not a new concept in physics, but a metaphorical account of change in cognitive structure [9].

5.2 Criteria for Model Selection

A model that can "explain everything" may merely be adding special rules without limit. Model selection therefore also needs to consider consistency, the capacity to adapt to new experience, and simplicity. A good self-model satisfies at least several conditions: it can cover a relatively large range of experience; it remains internally consistent across different experiences; it has the capacity to revise itself in the face of new experience; and it does not need to add independent rules without limit. This paper borrows the minimum-description-length principle to discuss model complexity — that is, examining model selection by combining the description lengths of model and data — but the present analysis remains at the philosophical level rather than being an information-theoretic model itself [10].

When a new experience cannot be explained by the current model, there are two basic ways of handling it: add special rules, or re-examine the model. Special rules are not necessarily wrong, because reality itself contains genuine special cases. But if a model relies more and more on special rules, its complexity increases rapidly. The most important theoretical significance of anomalous experience therefore lies not in proving the old model wrong, but in indicating that the old model may have reached the boundary of its explanatory capacity — anomalies can become the entry point of theoretical renewal.

5.3 Artificial Intelligence as an Auxiliary Modeling Tool

Artificial intelligence can serve as an auxiliary tool in the process of self-knowledge. The subject can translate its feelings, actions, choices, and historical experience into linguistic material, and let AI help organize and compare it. But AI cannot thereby become an external authority on the subject's "true self" — it does not possess the whole of the subject's first-person experience. What it can do is discover potential connections among the materials, propose candidate interpretations, detect conflicts within the model, and update candidate models in light of new material. It is worth noting that the subject itself does not know the answer in advance either. This is precisely why AI can become a co-modeler: both sides can only work on the existing material. However, it is also why AI cannot become the final arbiter — the final authority to confirm an interpretation lies not with the side that has more computing power, but with the only side that possesses all the first-person material. The most reasonable role for AI is therefore that of co-modeler, not final arbiter. This positioning is also consistent with the earlier argument about the irreplaceability of the subject.

If an AI proposes an interpretation of the subject, it should not be accepted merely because the language sounds persuasive. At least the following need to be considered: coverage (whether the interpretation covers more of the existing experience), consistency (whether the interpretation generates irresolvable conflicts with other experience), predictive power (whether, in the face of new experience, it can anticipate the subject's judgments or action tendencies more accurately than competing models), and simplicity (whether large numbers of special rules are needed to maintain apparent explanatory power).

5.4 Historical Experience: Irreversibility and Reconstruction

Among historical experiences there is a class of problems in which a loss that has already occurred cannot be undone by a new loss. If a person has died, inflicting new harm on the wrongdoer cannot return the life-time the dead person has already lost. This paper therefore holds that revenge cannot achieve a "settling of historical accounts" in the strict sense. But this does not mean that revenge has only psychological functions — it may also have social functions such as punishment, deterrence, confirmation of social norms, and the maintenance of identity and honor. This paper denies only one specific proposition: a new loss cannot truly make a past loss disappear.

Unlike irreversible historical losses, individuals also inherit a large number of conditions formed in the past — language, technology, institutions, education, the labor of others, and historically formed social resources all enter the space of possibility for current action. No individual can therefore act from a state entirely free of premises. But historical conditions and moral commands need to be distinguished: inheriting a condition does not automatically generate an unlimited moral debt. Certain concrete situations do require discussion of responsibility — for example, clear unjust gains, direct deprivation of rights, or unresolved institutional harm. "Inheritance" is therefore not a moral justification of all historical legacies, but only the description of a fact: the acting subject always acts within existing causal conditions.

History can explain how the current subject was formed, but it cannot automatically prescribe the subject's future action. A person's past experience can become a source of fear, or a condition for the formation of judgment — the same stretch of experience may even carry different meanings at different stages of a life. So-called value reconstruction is not a revision of facts, but a re-determination of the position of historical facts within the current incentive function. The past provides the material; the present subject decides how this material enters future action.

6 General Discussion: A Theoretical Chain

At this point the paper can form a continuous theoretical line. The irreplaceability of the subject constitutes the starting point of the analysis: self-knowledge is a continuing task whose subject-status is non-transferable, and whose object is the subject's own value structure. This task is irreplaceable not because of any mysterious essence, but because first-person experience cannot in principle be completely taken over by a third party.

The incentive function describes the dynamic mechanism of this value structure: through desire, goals, presuppositions, and intuition, the subject assigns value to possible states and forms tendencies to act. The subject's knowledge of the incentive function is continually revised by new experience, and goal self-containment determines whether a long-term value structure can continue to sustain itself after results are realized.

The social distribution of mental load accounts for the spillover effects of individual behavior: when different subjects act according to their respective incentive structures, their behavior changes the resource conditions and mental regulatory load of others. Such externalities display systematically

asymmetric distribution across power, morality, law, and class structure. Material conditions and mental states can be relatively decoupled to a certain degree, the degree depending on how independent the individual's value structure is.

The updating of cognitive models explains how change occurs: a relatively small informational input, if it can change the model by which the subject organizes existing experience, may further change future value judgments and action tendencies. Model selection needs to balance coverage, consistency, predictive power, and simplicity; and although historical experience is irreversible, its position within the incentive function can be rearranged.

These four parts are not four independent topics; they can be described in a unified way: how the subject forms a value structure, how the value structure generates action, how action enters society and produces external effects, and how new information in turn changes the value structure.

It must be emphasized once again that this paper's premise — "the main lines of all individuals' lives have equal normative value" — is an active value choice, not a logically necessary fact. All the normative inferences of this paper, especially those concerning how persons should interact, therefore have guiding force only for subjects who accept this premise. For subjects who do not accept it, what this paper provides is a descriptive analytical framework, not a normative command.

7 Conclusion

This paper has proposed an integrative analytical framework connecting four levels: individual value formation, action choice, social external effects, and cognitive renewal. Its main concepts — the irreplaceability of the subject, the incentive function, mental regulatory load, and the updating of cognitive models — interlock with one another.

The framework does not attempt to prove any pre-existing purpose of life, nor does it claim that self-knowledge is necessarily more important, in empirical terms, than other life content. What it does is provide a set of conceptual tools for analyzing four interrelated questions: "What do I want?" "How do I act?" "How do my actions affect others?" and "How am I changed by new experience?"

The framework is currently still at the stage of theoretical construction. Future research will need to further formalize and empirically test its core variables from three directions — cognitive science, social research, and information theory — including ways of observing mental regulatory load, independent measurement of material-to-mental conversion, ways of aggregating individual states into group-level variables, and methods for identifying the transfer of states in society. Solving these problems is not something theoretical definition itself can accomplish, but this paper hopes to provide a starting point for subsequent discussion and testing.

Finally, the paper's self-positioning should be stated. This paper is a theory-building integrative analytical framework, not an empirical study; at the current stage, its core criteria of evaluation are logical self-

consistency, cross-scenario explanatory power, and consistency of position, rather than quantitative precision, operationalized indicators, or traditional empirical significance.

This paper presupposes no universal value conclusions and provides analytical tools only; all normative inferences are built on the premise of the subject's active "check."

The classical theories touched upon in the text are all used as intellectual reference points; the framework's integrative path was proposed independently, and no directly corresponding precedent has been found.

Finally, the order in which this framework was generated should be explained. The concepts of this paper are not prior philosophical constructions. They are an abstracted and de-particularized summary of a body of concrete material completed earlier. Before this paper was written, these concepts had already been put to actual use in a series of narrative works and dialogic texts — including complete processes of application in the form of re-evaluating, for concrete individuals, the value of their pasts, choices, and experiences. For example, the argumentative structure of the "branch line of a life" originally came from a defense made for a concrete person, and was only later axiomatized and universalized. Likewise, a passage of text written for one individual was once applied, with almost no modification, to another person in an entirely different situation, and it retained its force. This kind of cross-case transferability constituted the initial motivation for abstracting these concepts into a framework, as well as the initial source of confidence in doing so. The methodological status of these narrative works is close to that of thought experiments: concrete applications involve the concrete situations of concrete persons, and presenting them in full would conflict with this paper's self-constraint of "providing no life content," so the identifying features of the cases have been deliberately removed. In other words, this paper is not without cases; the framework was used first and summarized later, and what this paper delivers is the tool itself — the records of the tool's use are not within the scope of this paper.

One final statement should be added, in the nature of a note on how to read this paper. This paper does not aim at philosophical or theoretical completeness. It does not claim that this set of concepts covers every aspect of the problem of value, and it does not take completeness as one of its own criteria — though incompleteness is not inconsistency: the concepts within the framework interlock, even as the framework has no intention of becoming a closed system. What the paper offers is simply a set of tools that are good enough to use, and the standard for judging them is not whether they are complete, but whether they work, and work well. As for why one should use this set as a whole rather than picking concepts from various sources and assembling a toolkit of one's own, the reason is practical: this set is integrated. All of its concepts are defined in a single vocabulary, share a single set of premises, and have had their interfaces calibrated in advance. The user does not need to do the integration work between the concepts personally, but can enter from any one of them and follow the existing connections to the rest. The value of a toolbox lies not in any of its tools being ultimate, but in their working together.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

AI usage

The English language of this manuscript was prepared with the assistance of AI-based tools; the author reviewed and edited the content and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

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Author Contribution

Zou Daoran conceived the framework, wrote the manuscript, and approved the final version.

Data Availability

The work is a theoretical and conceptual study. No empirical datasets were generated for this article, no statistical analysis was performed, and no statistical code, variable definitions, coding schemes or transformed data were produced. No empirical data were used. The qualitative materials that the conceptual framework draws upon are narrative and dialogic texts, and the published sources relied on in the argument are listed in full in the reference list, where DOIs are provided so that every source can be retrieved and verified. No datasets were generated or analysed, and therefore none are available for sharing.

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