

Categories of Moral Value—Some Basics

In the history of moral philosophy, we can articulate (perhaps loosely) three distinct categories of moral value that figure prominently in moral theories. We can also identify two distinct attitudes towards how many of these values are fundamental. First let's look at the general categories, again roughly drawn.

One category may be called the category of the Good. In this good we typically find references to human wellbeing, both individually (a single person's well being is morally good) and collectively (a group's or society's or community's wellbeing is a good thing); often, the wellbeing of other sentient beings is included under the category of the Good. There are various terms that refer to this in the history of philosophy, literature and in political documents. The terms *happiness* and *welfare* are also used to refer to human well being. More technical terms for this idea are *eudaimonia* (a Greek term that is sometimes translated as happiness but is perhaps more appropriately translated as "flourishing" because the term happiness and its cognates are often interpreted to refer only to subjective psychological states, an interpretation which is much more narrow than the Greeks had in mind with *eudaimonia*) and *utility* or *overall social utility*. At this point, it is important just to recognize certain terms as referring to things that are valuable and often categorized within the class of things considered good. There are many different and opposing specifications of what happiness or utility amounts to (pleasure, satisfaction of all or some of our desires, satisfaction of our preferences or revealed preferences, achievement of our projects and plans, and so on), but investigating the strengths and weaknesses of these differing specific conceptions need not occupy our attention right now. Values that are classified more or less routinely under the heading of the category of the good are often associated with states of the world that human action can help to bring about. Some social scientists, such as economists, for instance, aim to specify the constituent elements of wellbeing, devise a metric for measuring how much there is of it, and give advice as to how social policies, laws and institutions might help to produce more wellbeing and less suffering. Harms, pain, suffering, unhappiness, misery, and disutility are terms that signify setbacks to, or losses in, or the absence of, the good.

A second category of value often recognized in modern moral theory is the category of the Right. Moral rightness is often attributed to actions, but sometimes states of affairs are also characterized as being right in one sense or another. Some concepts frequently associated with this category of value are *duty* or *obligation*, *law*, *rights*, *fairness*, *equality*, *desert*, *respect* and *justice* (at least in the modern sense). As is the case with the elements listed within the category of the good above, these particular elements in the category of the right admit of many different interpretations—*what are our duties? in what cases is it right to achieve or aim for equality? on what basis do people deserve specific things?* These are all questions to which many answers have been given and over which much dispute rages, and I don't mean to stop here and chart them or sort them out. *Wrongdoing*, *lawlessness*, *unfairness*, *inequalities*, *disrespect*, *injustice* are terms that signify actions or states of the world that violate or undermine the right.

Another category of important moral value that is enjoying a great revival in contemporary derives from the Greek ethical outlook. This is the category of Virtue. In general, virtues are properties or traits of a person (or perhaps of a group of persons) that are thought to be desirable or praiseworthy or valuable in some way or another. The traditional virtues include *courage*, *moderation*, *wisdom*, *magnanimity*, *good humor*, *fidelity*, *piety*, and *justice* in the ancient sense. Recent virtue theorists have added many others and there is a great deal of interest in cultivating and refining this notion of value as being of fundamental importance for practical philosophy. Virtues are thought to be deeply ingrained character or intellectual traits related to human action; while some or perhaps even most depend upon certain natural capacities or endowments, virtues are importantly acquired or made deeply ingrained aspects of a person through habituation (indeed, our modern word 'ethical' derives from a greek word for habit; ethics is important because habits allow us to cultivate in ourselves certain desirable traits of character and mind

that lead to acting well. This is what it is to be virtuous. To have bad habits is to be vicious, or filled with vice.) *Vice, viciousness, corruption* are terms that signify the opposite of virtue.

There are terms that are not included herein that have an evaluative character and it might be possible to articulate other categories of moral value that have to do with our agency not reflected here, but these are categories most prominent in our western tradition. Many ethical theories attempt to express not just what has value but also to defend a view about systematic relations between the various things of value, including relationships between entire categories of value. In the ancient Greek world, while a great deal of ethical concern focused on which traits of mind and character were virtuous and how to develop or cultivate them, it was thought that virtues were important because possessing them enabled one to achieve for oneself *eudaimonia* or a flourishing life or condition. So, virtues were subordinate to that value which was most important—one's own flourishing condition. The Greeks thought that it was impossible for humans, given their nature, to achieve *eudaimonia* without virtue, but virtue was not rightly valued as a final intrinsically valuable end. Modern virtue theories are more varied on this point and many divorce the moral importance of virtues and vices from the claim that they are exclusively valuable as enabling conditions or means towards *eudaimonia*.

Many modern theorists are especially interested in the relationship between the good and the right. Some hold that the good is most fundamental and that all our concerns about moral rightness (duties, fairness, equality, desert, and importantly justice) are merely valuable as ways of maximizing the amount of what is good. In this sense, they say that the right is defined in terms that refer to the good, and so, the good is more fundamental than the right. They say it is more fundamental because we cannot possibly come to know or understand what moral rightness requires without first understanding what is morally good in a more basic sense. We will see one version of this kind of moral theory. Others, however, reject this view insisting that there are some actions or states of the world that are morally disvaluable even if they are necessary to increase the amount of what they admit is morally good in the world. If this is right, they claim, then there must be something morally fundamental that constrains or restricts what we may do permissibly in trying to increase the amount of human good, like happiness. While we won't study in any detail a theory that has this structure, we will certainly consider its significance.

The attempt to reduce all moral values to a single value is an attractive one. If it can be done, then it means that there is hope that there could be no moral dilemmas in the world. A dilemma is a claim or a choice for which there are only two possible options or alternatives where the nature of the choices or alternatives leads to a fundamental problem that cannot be resolved. In moral terms, if one is faced with a dilemma, then one is faced with a situation in which there are two and only two choices open to one and either one that is acted upon results in a moral failing in some way. Of course, if there are moral dilemmas, this would be undesirable if one aims always to do what is morally right. If there were only one fundamental moral value and all other values were derived from it, then it would be a good deal less likely that there could be moral dilemmas. The idea that there is only one fundamental moral value and that all other moral concerns are derived from this fundamental one is called **value monism**. Value monism might also make it easier to compare actions that appear on the surface to involve two different moral values (like justice and overall well-being) because in principle all moral values would be commensurate, or capable of being compared on some standard measure.

By contrast, some reject moral monism, arguing instead that there is more than one *fundamental* moral value. An example would be that human happiness is fundamentally valuable and justice is fundamentally valuable but that we cannot always (or perhaps even EVER) convert either one into the other. In other words, there is just no way to say how much of one (say human happiness) would morally justify a sacrifice of the other (say, a violation of justice). This example between happiness and justice is merely an example, and does not exhaust the way fundamental moral values may be incommensurable or non-comparable. At any rate, the view that there is more than one *fundamental* moral value is called **value pluralism**.