

## Basic Distinctions in Ethical Theory

*Below are some good distinctions to take note of, when thinking about ethical theory. We don't bother to give strict definitions of the key phrases since they are used in accord with standard English. However, you might not have noticed the difference between some of the meanings. This handout is meant as a remedy.*

Instrumental Value vs. Intrinsic Value: Some things are valuable because they are an effective *instrument* or *means* to some other valuable thing. For example, money has instrumental value because you can use it to buy food, clothing, and other things that you want. However, some things are valuable not as a means but as an “end” in itself. Happiness, for example, is valuable not because it is useful for getting something *else* that is valuable. Rather, happiness is valuable for its own sake, i.e., it is “intrinsically” valuable. (Some philosophers have said that happiness is the *only* thing that is intrinsically valuable, but that is controversial. Other philosophers also include health, freedom, etc.) Note that some things might be both intrinsically valuable *and* be a valuable means to something else that is valuable. Intelligence, for example, is plausibly valuable for its own sake, and also valuable as a means to getting other valuable things.

Value vs. Moral Value: Not all valuable things are morally valuable. If you can run fast, that has some sort of value—but as such, it is not *morally* valuable. Running fast, as such, does not give you a moral advantage over other people. In Ethical Theory, we focus on what has moral value (although things with “nonmoral value” are sometimes relevant to what has moral value).

Moral Value vs. Prudential Value: If you don't cheat on a test, that has moral value. But it has *prudential* value as well: It is prudent not to cheat on a test since then you do not risk losing your stipend, getting expelled from the University, etc. Of course, if you don't get caught, then cheating might have prudential value—it is likely to result in a better grade. But even then, cheating does not have *moral* value... It is therefore important that we distinguish the prudential value of an action from its moral value.

Objects of Moral Evaluation: There are differences in morally evaluating actions, vs. character traits, vs. people themselves—and it is important to notice the differences. In Ethical Theory, we usually focus on the moral value of *actions*, such as whether euthanasia is morally permissible. Later, however, we will study “virtue ethics,” where we often consider the moral value of people's characters.

Permissible vs. Obligatory vs. Supererogatory: When we say that an action is “morally right,” we could mean at least two different things. First, we could mean that the act is morally “not wrong,” as when we speak of “knowing the difference between right and wrong.” Then, to say that an act is “morally right” means only that the act is *morally permitted*.

But we could also mean something stronger. We could mean that it is *morally obligatory*—that it is morally wrong *not* to act that way. If you keep your promise, for example, you are doing something “morally right” in the stronger sense. After all, if you were to break your promise, you would be acting immorally. In contrast, studying architecture is “morally right” in the first sense, but not in the second sense. Normally, studying architecture is morally permissible; yet if you don't study architecture, you are not acting immorally!

Arguably, some acts could be called “morally right” in yet a third sense. This is when the act goes *beyond* your moral obligations—it does *more* than merely fulfill your moral

obligations. Ethicists describe these acts as “supererogatory.” Thus, if you and your sister contribute equally to completing a job, it might be “morally right”—in the obligatory sense—to split the earnings. But if you generously decided to let her have 75% of the earnings, we might instead call that a “morally right” act in the supererogatory sense. Although, perhaps it is more natural to say that it is a morally *righteous* act. (Yet in standard English, an obligatory act could be called morally righteous as well...so it is perhaps clearest to use ‘supererogatory’ to describe acts that go beyond the call of duty.)

**Note**

Value is not all-or-nothing. Rather, value comes in degrees: 2000 tenge is more valuable than 1000 tenge, and normally, giving 2000 tenge to charity is more morally valuable than giving 1000 tenge. Thus, the different kinds of value mentioned above should be seen accordingly: Instrumental value, intrinsic value, moral value, and prudential value each come in degrees. (But to be sure: Comparing the value of acts is far less straightforward than comparing the value of 2000 vs. 1000 tenge!)