

Making Distinctions¹

Suppose you suspect that your friend is about to commit murder, and you tie them up with rope to stop them. Normally, this would be a violation of their rights. But suppose you say that you had a good reason to do this. Is that true?

Very often, *whether a claim is true depends on how the key terms are interpreted*. Consider that in one obvious sense, you did have a “good reason” to tie up your friend: You were trying to save a life. But in another sense, it is dubious whether stopping a *possible* murder is a good reason to violate their rights...

In such a quandary, **when you are pulled in two directions, make a distinction.**² *This is such an important lesson that I have made it one of the first lessons of this course.*

We can say you had a *prima facie* good reason to restrain your friend: Saving a life is obviously good, at least on the surface. But it is dubious whether you had a good reason *all things considered*. If we weighed all the pros and cons of restraining a potential murderer, it might not be clear whether you *ultimately* had a “good reason.”

The distinction helps by enabling us to see where the issue really lies. Without it, we might treat the *prima facie* reason as an ultimately good reason, and thus judge the case superficially. But the distinction gives us a deeper understanding and helps us focus on what needs clarification.

Not coincidentally: The difference between an expert and a non-expert is partly an ability to use more and better distinctions. A non-expert may say “a high-fat diet makes you gain weight.” An expert might say instead “long-chain fatty acids are likely to be stored in fat cells, but medium-chain fatty acids are rapidly metabolized.” Again, a distinction enables a stronger understanding.³

However, you don’t need expert-levels of knowledge to make many crucial distinctions. The case of the potential murderer was meant to illustrate that. Some common yet important terms have multiple meanings, and in such cases, it is often crucial to note the differences. (It is good to develop the habit of asking “*What do you mean?*”)

Addendum: ‘Good reason’ is a single phrase with two different meanings. But also, two phrases sometimes *seem* to have the same meaning, but really have two different meanings. (“Pseudo-synonyms.”⁴) For example, ‘knowing’ and ‘being certain’ may seem to be synonyms. But I bet you can find examples where a person is “certain” and yet does not “know” what they are talking about. Making distinctions in those kinds of cases can also be quite important.

¹ This handout was inspired by an as-yet unpublished book manuscript by Bryan Frances, entitled *Achieving Wisdom and Avoiding Stupidity*.

² Cf. William James’ second lecture in his (1907/1975) *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³ The example is from J.D. Meier (n.d.) How to use distinctions to think better and deeper about information. Available at <https://sourcesofinsight.com/get-smarter-by-making-distinctions/>.

⁴ W.V.O. Quine famously argued that true synonyms do not exist, strictly speaking. See his (1951) Two dogmas of empiricism, *Philosophical Review* 60: 20-43.