**Human values**

A frequently asked question is, "What are the differences between values, ethics, morals and principles?" The short answer to the question is usually, "Values motivate, morals and ethics constrain." In other words values describe what is important in a person’s life, while ethics and morals prescribe what is or are not considered appropriate behaviour in living one's life. Principles inform our choice of values, morals and ethics.

"Generally speaking, value refers to the relative worth of a quality or object. Value is what makes something desirable or undesirable" (Shockley-Zalabak 1999, p. 425). Through applying our personal values (usually unconsciously) as benchmarks, we continually make subjective judgments about a whole manner of things:

“...we are more likely to make choices that support our value systems than choices that will not. Let us say that financial security is a strong value for an individual. When faced with a choice of jobs, chances are the individual will carefully examine each organization for potential financial and job security. The job applicant who values financial security may well take a lower salary offer with a well established company over a higher-paying offer from a new, high risk venture. Another job seeker with different values, possibly adventure and excitement, might choose the newer company simply for the potential risk and uncertain future”.

Values, therefore, become part of complex attitude sets that influence our behavior and the behaviour of all those with whom we interact. What we value guides not only our personal choices but also our perceptions of the worth of others. We are more likely, for example, to evaluate highly someone who holds the same hard-work value we do than someone who finds work distasteful, with personal gratification a more important value. We may also call the person lazy and worthless, a negative value label. (Shockley-Zalabak 1999, pp. 425-426)

Clearly our values influence what we will determine as ethical; however, values are our measures of importance, where as ethics represent our judgments about right and wrong. This close relationship between importance and right and wrong is a powerful influence on our behaviour and how we evaluate the behaviour of others.

There are three principle types of values which humans can have: preferential values, instrumental values and intrinsic values. Each plays an important role in our lives, but they don't all play equal roles in the formation of moral standards and moral norms.

Ethics, Morals, and Values, How do they relate?

One of the most important characteristics of moral judgments is that they express our values. Not all expressions of values are moral judgments, but all moral judgments do express something about what we value. Thus, understanding morality requires investigating what people value and why.

There are three principle types of values which humans can have: preferential values, instrumental values and intrinsic values. Each plays an important role in our lives, but they don't all play equal roles in the formation of moral standards and moral norms.

**Preference Value**

The expression of preference is the expression of some value we hold. When we say that we prefer to play sports, we are saying that we value that activity. When we say that we prefer relaxing at home over being at work, we are saying that we hold our leisure time more highly than our work time. Most ethical theories do not place much emphasis on this type of value when constructing arguments for particular actions being moral or immoral. The one exception would be hedonistic ethical theories which explicitly place such preferences at the center of moral consideration. Such systems argue that those situations or activities which make us happiest are, in fact, the ones we should morally choose.

**Instrumental Value**

When something is valued instrumentally, that means we only value it as a means to achieve some other end which is, in turn, more important. Thus, if my car is of instrumental value, that means that I only value it insofar as it allows me to accomplish other tasks, such as getting to work or the store.

Instrumental values play an important role in teleological moral systems - theories of morality which argue that the moral choices are those which lead to the best possible consequences (such as human happiness). Thus, the choice to feed a homeless person is considered a moral choice and is valued not simply for its own sake but, rather, because it leads to some other good - the well-being of another person.

**Intrinsic Value**

Something which has intrinsic value is valued purely for itself - it isn't used simply as a means to some other end and it isn't simply "preferred" above other possible options. This sort of value is the source of a great deal of debate in moral philosophy because not all agree that such intrinsic values actually exist. If intrinsic values do exist, how is it that they occur? Are they like color or mass, a characteristic which we can detect so long as we use the right tools? We can explain what produces the characteristics like mass and color, but what would produce the characteristic of value? If people are unable to reach any sort of agreement about the value of some object or event, does that mean that its value, whatever it is, can't be intrinsic?

**Instrumental vs. Intrinsic Values**

One problem in ethics is, assuming that intrinsic values really do exist, how do we differentiate them from instrumental values? That may seem simple at first, but it isn't. Take, for example, the question of good health - that is something which just about everyone values, but is it an intrinsic value? Some might be inclined to answer "yes," but in fact people tend to value good health because it allows them to engage in activities they like. So, that would make good health an instrumental value. But are those pleasurable activities intrinsically valuable? People often perform them for a variety of reasons - social bonding, learning, to test their abilities, etc.

So, perhaps those activities are also instrumental rather than intrinsic values - but what about the reasons for those activities? We could keep going on like this for quite a long time. It seems that everything we value is something which leads to some other value, suggesting that all of our values are, at least in part, instrumental values. Perhaps there is no "final" value or set of values and we are caught in a constant feed-back loop where things we value continually lead to other things we value.

**Values: Subjective or Objective?**

Another debate in the field of ethics is the role human play when it comes to creating or assessing value. Some argue that value is a purely human construction - or at least, the construction of any being with sufficiently advanced cognitive functions. Should all such beings disappear from the universe, then some things like mass would not change, but other things like value would also disappear.

Others argue, however, that at least some forms of value (intrinsic values) exist objectively and independently of any observer. Thus, our only role is in recognizing the intrinsic value which certain objects of goods hold. We might deny that they have value, but in such a situation we are either deceiving ourselves or we are simply mistaken. Indeed, some ethical theorists have argued that many moral problems could be resolved if we could simply learn to better recognize those things which have true value and dispense with artificially created values which distract us.