

What do we mean by an “ethical value?”

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Anyone teaching ethics will agree that since “value” is among the most-abused words in the English language, students struggle with its precise meaning in ethics, such as its application in the Potter Box, an ethical decision-making tool. They use value as a noun, a verb or an adjective in trying to make the abstract more concrete. “Love” is a value, which can also be valuable by those who value it.

Trying to formulate a precise definition of “value” depends on one’s academic discipline. While a media ethicist will utilize values to build ethical theory or create ethical principles, a social psychologist will employ them to understand value-attitude to explain behavior. Thus value is a neutral term, not always moral, and can also be called a principle.ⁱ Value involves with worth of a thing, while valuation means an estimate of this worth.

In moral reasoning, a value is something that is “esteemed, prized, regarded highly, or as a good.”ⁱⁱ From a behavioral perspective, “values are the building blocks of attitudes, the learned and emotional, intellectual and behavioral responses to persons, things and events.”ⁱⁱⁱ For the social psychologist, as stated by Schwartz, “human values as desirable goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people’s lives.”^{iv}

In developing his universal theory of values, Schwartz created a typology of values as “desirable goals” derived from three universal requirements of human existence “needs of biological organisms, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and survival

moral theory or code of ethics.^{ix} Individuals live with a “value system” or “a hierarchical arrangement of values, a rank-ordering of values along a continuum of importance” (Rokeach, 1968, p. 551).

While an individual’s values emerge from family life, religious or cultural roots, those values can be influenced by encounters with other individuals and groups with differing values. Those values can sometimes be compromised when professional values override personal values. For example, a public relations practitioner is told by a corporate executive to deceive the media about an embarrassing scandal which positions the personal values of truth and deception against the professional values of success and keeping one’s job.

As an assessment and measuring tool, ethical values can be helpful in building a moral theory, deriving a system of ethics, understanding human conduct, clarifying motivations and goals, determining right from wrong or good from bad, and providing a foundation for ethical decisions.

ⁱ Michael Bugeja, Living Ethics Across Media Platforms (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

ⁱⁱ Peter A. Angeles, Dictionary of Philosophy. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1981), 310.

ⁱⁱⁱ Albert A. Harrison, Individuals and Groups: Understanding Social Behavior (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1976), 192.

^{iv} Shalom Schwartz and Sipke Huismans, “Value Priorities and Religiosity in Four Western Religions,” Social Psychology Quarterly 58 (1995): 89.

^v Schwartz, 89, citing previous works.

^{vi} D. Don Welch, “Social Ethics, Overview.” Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics. (San Diego: Academic Press, 1998) Vol. 4, 149, 150.