

## Moral Value

PHIL101

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In this section of the course, we turn our attention to value theory. As the expression suggests, value theory is the theory of value. The class of values – i.e., of kinds of value – is a broad and perhaps heterogeneous class. It includes social and political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and ethics or moral value theory. Our focus will be on the last of these, moral value.

The term ‘moral’ derives from Latin term *mores* meaning “habits” or “customs”. Thus, when we speak of moral values we speak of the values concerning human activity or action. Moral values express standards of human conduct, standards making human conduct either valuable in itself or valuable for what it may bring or produce. We will examine several theories of moral value, in this section. Some of these theories seek to identify standards for living well, others focus more narrowly on standards of right conduct.

In each case, we will find drawn a connection between a theory of human being and certain guidelines or recommendations for human practice. More specifically, the philosopher will tell us that since certain states or acts are “good” for humans, therefore we ought to act in certain specifiable ways. Notice here the relationship between “the good” and an imperative to act. To assert the goodness of something is not only to *describe* the world as being a certain way, but also to *prescribe* that the world *should* be a certain way – namely, in such a way as to bring about or preserve that good thing. That is, to say that something is good is to imply that it “should be.” For instance, to say that universal human love is (or would be) a good thing is to suggest that it is something that we should seek to bring about. The goodness of universal human love implies the imperative to bring it to fruition. Value theories that assert the goodness (i.e., value) of some thing, some state or act thus express *norms* about how we should then behave.

A *normative* theory indicates how a certain state of affairs *should* be, or how humans should in certain situations behave.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the above terms, the following are basic to this section of our course:

- **Prudential vs. Moral Goods:** A fundamental distinction in moral theory is that between prudential and moral goods. Prudential goods concern human interests, where human interests include our needs and desires. The satisfaction of any human need or desire constitutes a prudential good. In this sense, we may say, it is good to find something to eat when one is hungry.

It is more difficult to define moral good, and indeed its very distinction from prudential goodness is controversial. We can offer synonyms, such as the “right” or the

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<sup>1</sup> There are, in addition to normative moral theories, what are called *descriptive* moral theories. A descriptive moral theory is one that describes how, in fact, humans behave morally – what ideals their behavior reflects, what states or events or objects they regard as morally good. It does not attempt to assert which state or event or object is in fact morally valuable and thus asserts no norms for correct human behavior. Thus, a normative moral theory goes further than simply describing human moral behavior: it makes claims about what, in fact, the moral good is and in so doing states what are the correct norms for human moral behavior.

#### IV: Moral Value

“correct” in human behavior. In this sense, we may say that it was right of Smith to help Jones across the street, not for any satisfaction that Smith might thus have gained, but simply for its being the right thing to do. Part of the difficulty is that there is no generally accepted definition of moral goodness; we will examine three attempts to formulate one.

As these terms are ordinarily used, the prudential and the moral are thought to be distinct. We ordinarily think, that is, that there is a difference between what it is right for Smith to do and what Smith might do to satisfy his needs or desires. Sometimes prudence and morality coincide, as when Smith actively wants to help Jones across the street, even while he should. In other cases, prudence and morality diverge: Smith might not wish to help Jones, even though he should. As ordinarily understood, we also generally regard moral goods as “overriding” in relation to prudential goods. Generally, we think, we should do what’s right regardless of our particular interests.

Some, however, deny that there is, truly, such a thing as moral goodness, moral right and wrong. Some maintain that prudential goods are the only form of goods associated with human action. Our standards of right and wrong aren’t objective facts about our world, but, more likely, expressions of the interests of some group or groups. Thus, for instance, some might say that we have moral rules about helping old folks across the street not because these moral rules are objective fact, but because, generally speaking, we want a society in which our elderly are so-assisted. This gives us the following distinction.

- Moral Realism vs. Moral Skepticism: The *moral realist* is one who accepts the above distinction between the prudential and the morally good. For the moral realist, there are moral truths that do not reduce to the preferences of some agent or agents. The *moral skeptic* rejects this view, holding that there are no moral truths, per se, but only truths about human prudential goods – i.e., truths about what will and will not satisfy our needs and desires.
- Moral Absolutism vs. Moral Relativism: A further issue in moral value theory concerns the nature of moral truth. Where moral truth is accepted as genuine, the further question may be raised as to whether moral truth is the same for all or, rather, varies by person or culture. The *moral absolutist* maintains that moral truths are the same for all, while the *moral relativist* maintains that moral truth varies either by person or by culture or society.<sup>2</sup>

Of our writers in this section of the course, Aristotle, Kant, and Bentham may all be classified as moral absolutists, which implies also that they are moral realists. Nietzsche (from Section III of our course) is the clearest moral skeptic that we study. Sartre might be rightly regarded as a moral relativist, and perhaps Kierkegaard as well; but the focus of their moral theories is not so much on identifying morally correct action as it is on finding authentic, meaningful forms of living.

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<sup>2</sup> Many today would affirm moral relativism, maintaining that what is “right” for one person is not necessarily “right” for another, and that each of us must decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. It is important to note, however, that few of us are committed to moral relativism properly understood. In most cases, our moral judgments take the form of absolute, objective statements. If Williams, for instance, believes that pre-marital sex is wrong, she may *say* that this is nevertheless for each of us to “decide for ourselves.” But this won’t mean that Williams thinks that it’s wrong *for her* to engage in pre-marital sex but *right* for Brown. What she means is that Brown is “free” to hold another opinion, even though she thinks that opinion, in fact, incorrect. That is, what we think of as a form of moral relativism is, in fact, a form of politeness: we do in fact disagree about what we take to be the objectively correct moral behaviors, but in many cases we won’t confront each other about them, in public.

#### *IV: Moral Value*

As you proceed through the readings of this section, keep in mind also the above progression from description to prescription: what is the philosopher saying about human nature and the nature of the world that we inhabit, and what conclusions does this entail about how we should act?