CHAPTER 3

Paying Attention to Values

Many moral issues arise from conflicting or unclear moral values. To understand moral issues, let alone to have any hope of making any progress on them, we therefore need to begin by looking at those values. What do we mean when we say something is a value? What do we mean when we say something is a moral value? And how do we begin spelling out the contending moral values in a particular issue?

DEFINITIONS: VALUES AND MORAL VALUES

What Are Values?

We hold many values. We value fairness, trustworthiness, the well-being of others and the world, and many other things too. These we consider moral values. We also value good neighbors, good music, daily exercise, our kids’ laughter, meeting new people, and again many other things, which are not moral values (not immoral values either, simply nonmoral values). Truth, equality, cleanliness; “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; faith, hope, and charity; “random kindness and senseless acts of beauty”; peace and quiet, enthusiasm, good sportsmanship—all of these are “values” in the broad sense.

Or rather: all of these are examples of values in a broad sense. But they do not tell us what values themselves are. A philosopher will ask: what do they all have in common that makes them all examples of “values”?

Let us say this. Our values are those things we care about, that matter to us; those goals and ideals we aspire to and measure ourselves or others or our society by. When I say that I value playing fair or staying healthy, I mean (at least) that I am interested in these things, that I care about them, and probably that I do specific things to promote or safeguard them. I want to hear my kids laugh, so I tell them jokes.

Notice that this definition does not say anything about where values ultimately come from or how they might be prioritized or justified. That comes later. Right now we just need a standard for classification. “Bad” or questionable values count too. We also value having a lot of stuff, driving fast,
Values may also conflict. Certainly we value incompatible things, at least in certain situations. I value peace and quiet, and I also value my children's freedom. I can't always have both. On the other hand, if values didn't conflict, life would be a lot less interesting!

**What Are Moral Values?**

Values come in types. *Aesthetic* values have to do with art, beauty, and attractiveness. *Scientific* values and others have to do with knowledge, truth, experiment, and so on. *Economic* values have to do with production, efficiency, and market prices. *Instrumental* values have to do with the means to our ends: the effectiveness of technologies, the usefulness of our tools. There are other types too.

And: there are *moral* values—a kind of value distinct from those just listed, and crucial to our study here. Moral values are a subset, in other words, of values generally. Moral values include fairness, trustworthiness, the well-being of others and the world, as just mentioned, and many others too, such as equality, respect, and responsibility; reducing pain and suffering; "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; humility, benevolence, and keeping your promises.

Once again, though, these examples do not tell us what moral values themselves are. What do they all have in common that makes them all examples of "moral" values?

Let us say this. Moral values are *values that give voice to the needs and legitimate expectations of others as well as ourselves*. Moral values connect us to a larger world ("the needs of others as well as ourselves") and introduce the question of what others are entitled to ask from us and what we are entitled to ask from them and from ourselves ("legitimate expectations").

These terms may need some explaining.

By "others" we usually understand other people. However, the term may also include (some?) other animals and the natural world too. Chapters 20 and 21 return to this question.

Note that our own selves are included. Morality on our definition is not opposed to the self: rather, it puts the self into context. We come to see ourselves as one among others. You can see already why values like equality and fairness come up. Highlighting the needs of others, you can also see why reducing suffering and promoting well-being are vital moral values too.

We have "legitimate expectations" to be treated with respect and as equals. Some legitimate expectations we regard as *rights*: rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; rights to free speech or to hold property; and so on. We also legitimately expect each other to act responsibly, keep promises, and so on. Another way of saying this is: we have legitimate expectations both
Some people think that we ought to be pure egoists, even though we often aren't. This view is not committed to psychological egoism; it is called "ethical egoism."

Ethical egoism is not the claim that we ought to do whatever we want to do—for what we want to do might not be in our (carefully considered) self-interest. For example, we might want to do something harmful to ourselves in the long run (but fun now—you fill in the examples), or we might even want to put someone else's needs ahead of our own.

Ethical egoists are more calculating. Often they will be sociable enough. It's in their interests to maintain others' good will, after all, and besides sometimes their desires may coincide with others'. Still, they say, the bottom line ought to be their own good, and nothing but.

If it is to be moral on our definition, though, this sort of egoism must defend itself by reference to standards that go beyond the self. It must make reference to the needs and legitimate expectations of others as well as the self. Oddly enough, this is exactly what happens. Ethical egoists argue that everyone will be better off if we all act to further our own self-interests. Many argue on economic grounds, for example, that a system of universal self-seeking, like capitalism, produces the greatest social well-being in the long run.

These are arguable points, to be sure. What's really remarkable, though, is that they are not egoistic arguments. The whole aim is to show that everyone will be better off if everyone adopts ethical egoism. These are arguments that do give voice to the needs and legitimate expectations of others, because others' interests or rights are counted too. The ethical egoists I know (I do know some) are absolutely scrupulous in this regard. They do see themselves as one among others; their egoism is moral—just maybe unusual!

Self-centeredness sometimes has its uses. At times of transition in our lives, we may find ourselves with fairly few attachments and unsure of our direction. A turn inward—a preoccupation for a while with our selves—is natural and healthy. It's dramatically limited (I would argue) as a full time way of life, but sometimes sensible in the short run. Morality isn't the whole story either.

Besides, selves often are fragile. Sometimes we need to give ourselves the support and attention we need to recover a sense of who we are and what we want. This is probably much more common than the opposite—the self that claims too much and needs to be put in its place.

Still more common than both, though, are many other reasons why we fail to take account of the needs and expectations of others. I think that the real concern of moralists should not be egoism but inattention. Habit, for one thing, and the inability to listen. Or the unwillingness to listen, as in offhand self-justification. Or the unwillingness to acknowledge sheer difference—this would be "self-centeredness" not in the sense of pursuing only one's own interests but in the sense of taking one's self to be the only kind of self there can be. You can't even begin to cross the gap between self and other if you don't think there is a gap in the first place.

So morality sometimes does have an uphill fight. There are parts of ourselves that resist. It just may not be so useful to think of those parts as "egoistic." We're more complex and interesting than that!

Some moral debates will be new to you, and answering these questions will take some research or exploration—listening carefully to the different sides, asking around. For other moral debates you can fill in the blanks much more easily. You've heard the contending positions already, or can easily figure them out. The point of our definition of moral values, in any case, is to give you the right blanks to fill in. It gives you the right questions to ask. Here are some guidelines as you begin to answer them.

Expect Diversity

In the first place, expect diversity. We hold a lot of moral values, and they aren't shy about showing up all the time.

Here, for example, is a survey of some moral issues from just one weekend's newspapers. Notice how many different values quickly come up. I will underline them as we go.

The president is proposing to raise the minimum wage. It's a matter of fairness, he says. The underlying plea is that people who are working hard, supporting themselves and their families and contributing to society, should
be able at least to get by. "If people are going to show up for work," he says, "they ought to be able to raise their children in dignity."

He also notes that many of the people struggling to get by on minimum-wage jobs are single mothers whose only fallback is welfare or homelessness. Meeting even their basic needs—survival and some degree of independence—requires action.

Meanwhile, opponents worry about losing the social benefits of lower wages, such as more jobs, and about fairness (again) to employers at the margins. Would raising the minimum wage push some of them out of business? Might it therefore actually reduce the number of jobs available?

The next page: The tobacco industry is back in court, fighting liability claims from individuals and from many of the states. Issues of truthfulness and responsibility come up. How dangerous did the manufacturers know cigarette smoking to be, and when did they know it? On the other hand, what are the responsibilities of smokers who "should have known better"?

A related article reports that small American tobacco farmers have now made common cause with antismoking forces against the big tobacco companies, who appear ready to cut them loose. The antismoking forces are unwilling to cut the farmers off completely. Probably they also need the farmers' political support. But the arguments are moral too: it's just not fair to cut them off, not after both the tobacco companies and the government led them on for most of the century. Besides, we care about saving small family farms and the values we associate with them: a more family-focused life, self-reliance, stewardship of the land.

A photo shows a line of Amish buggies stretching along a country road. A funeral procession for a buggy driver killed by a drunk driver in a car. An all too familiar story, made more poignant still because the accident we imagine is also a collision (literally) of two radically different cultures. A life of simplicity and sobriety, cut short too soon by a culture that is the opposite of both.

We learn from a related article, meanwhile, that the Texas state Senate is about to approve a bill that "would make people under age 21 who climb behind a wheel after drinking subject to losing their licenses for four to six months—even if there is only a trace of alcohol on their breaths." "Zero tolerance," the sponsor calls it. If we expect responsible driving, he says, we have to get (very) tough.

So: here are three issues and fourteen values, including some overlaps (fairness comes up more than once, but in different senses). That's diversity for you. And that's just a start, as you'll see in the next section. Each debate also has its own context—from social and political issues to personal responsibility and the nature of the "simple life"—or sometimes several at once. Other values lie in the background, a little less explicit. Doing the best by the most people, for instance (as in: what are the overall social effects of raising the minimum wage?), Old ways versus new ways, for instance (the unsettling question raised by the Amish way of life for mainstream culture). And others as well.
Be Fair

Spelling out some of the moral values at stake in these cases may be hard, especially when you disagree with them. Amish buggy drivers may just make you impatient. Drunk drivers may make you impatient too, and you may not want to consider the dangers of “zero tolerance.” People who always complain about helping the poor, or tobacco company lawyers who still won’t admit that smoking may cause cancer, may just annoy you.

But: we’ve already spoken about keeping an open mind. Here is another place that we often turn more dogmatic than we should. It’s wiser to remind ourselves again that we don’t know everything there is to know. In particular, if we dismiss some moral values without any kind of exploration or careful attention, we might never know what kinds of depth we missed. To look at a buggy driver as a mere curiosity, or as a hazard that ought to be banned from the road, misses a lot that is intriguing and maybe even enriching. Be fair to them: ask what these people are about instead. What are their goals and ideals? What matters to them? What are their needs and expectations?

At least try to see matters from others’ points of view. You’re not being asked, at this point, to decide who is “right” and who is “wrong,” or which way we ought finally to choose (if we must). No: the task here is just to figure out what matters to them. Not just filtered through a moral position you’ve already taken. Put your own position aside for a moment. Make some distinctions.

Explain and Clarify

Moral values often show up in forms that are not fully spelled out or clear. Part of our job in unpacking moral issues, then, is to do some of the explaining and clarifying ourselves.

Make some distinctions.

MOLLY (four years old): Ruthie got to use the big markers and I only got to use the plain ones!

ME: Yup. [To myself: Uh oh]

MOLLY: That’s not fair!

ME: Why not?

MOLLY: Because I should get to use the big ones if Ruthie does!

ME: But the big markers are not washable and you’re not quite old enough to remember to keep them off your clothes and the table. As soon as you can keep them just on the paper, you can use them too.

MOLLY: I can! I can!

ME: Oh, Molly, that’s what you said yesterday, and I let you use them, but you ended up with a big orange splot on your shirt. A nonwashable splot!

[Molly sniffs.]

Is it fair that Molly cannot use the big markers? If so, it is because fairness is not as simple as it looks on its face—because fairness cannot necessarily be measured by immediate equality of results. It’s complicated. Fairness asks us to allow each child all that he or she is capable of, consistent with other needs and limits, including fairness to parents who have to try to wash markers off clothes or tables.

It’s not so easy to spell out in a way that a 4-year-old can understand. In fact, just for that reason, some other approach to the problem sometimes may be needed. Getting bigger washable markers, for example. The point is that this is how it goes, in real-life practice. Pay attention and take seriously the demand for clarification and distinctions.

In fact, fairness is a passion with all of us. Is it fair, for example, to set up a system of preferences for one group over another, even if it only comes into play when qualifications are otherwise equal and/or does not compel any particular choice? Some people argue that it is; others argue that it cannot be. It’s the same sort of issue. Would some distinctions help? Can you know until you’ve tried?

Don’t Downgrade Emotion

One last clip from the newspaper. Developers and environmentalists clash over new building along a river that serves as many downstream communities’ water supply and feeds major shellfish banks off the coast. The river is already polluted by runoff from farms and lawn fertilizers, sewage treatment plants, and so on, though for just that reason the impact of any single new development by itself is not that great.

The civil engineer who works for the developer and presented the case to the City Planning Commission has this to say about his environmentalist counterparts: “We’re doing this from a fact standpoint and they [the environmentalists] are doing this from an emotional standpoint.” We have facts, he says; they’re just “emotional.” His suggestion, of course, is that they should not be taken seriously. Emotion is supposed to be inappropriate when ethical or political matters come up. Is it?

No. Being emotional can be entirely appropriate. Indeed, it’s necessary. Remember: values themselves are things we care about. “Care” is an emotion. It’s not only an emotion—it rests on “facts,” perspectives on the world, histories and personal choices, and many other things—but the emotional side, the caring side, is essential as well.

The developers “care” too, of course. They too have values. They want to build houses and roads and malls and make money. They’re a little annoyed in this case too, if you read between the lines, because they have to work under many more restrictions than they used to, and still are being criticized for not doing enough. The suggestion is that this isn’t quite fair—and that is a feeling, in part, too.
What would be inappropriate is “pure” emotion: having no facts at all, just a “feeling.” But clearly this is not true of either side in this debate. The environmentalists in this case have facts just like the developers. They have facts about the overall state of the river, about alternative uses of the site in question, and so on. Perhaps the developers, sensing they have the Planning Commission on their side, can afford to speak with the appearance of dispassion, while the environmentalists sound more upset or desperate. But this has nothing to do with who has facts and who doesn’t—it has to do with who is being listened to.

In short: moral values are partly emotional, just as they are partly fact based. All moral values, on both (all) sides. So don’t avoid emotion in expressing them. Do not therefore become maudlin or hysterical; but also do not pretend to be dispassionate and accuse the other side of being uninformed. Both are unhelpful extremes. Just speak carefully, listen sympathetically, and try to give all of the relevant values a voice that is measured but strong.

“The Great American Desert” (selections)

EDWARD ABBEY

Edward Abbey was an American nature writer, backcountry hiker, and militant defender of wilderness whose writings include the classic Desert Solitaire as well as the controversial novel The Monkeywrench Gang, which allegedly inspired some infamous environmental actions in the eighties and nineties.

In this essay Abbey is trying to explain why he loves the desert—why he values it and why we should too. So you might expect a nice poetic rhapsody to the loveliness of the desert, making us think of cactus-and-sunset pictures in Sierra Club calendars or travel magazines. But this is not what Abbey says—just the opposite. First he details the desert’s horrors; then he tells you how to prepare to hike there if you’re crazy enough to go in the first place (not that he ever prepares at all); then he reminds you to disrupt any mining or hunting or road-building activities you happen to run across; and finally he tells a story about an ancient arrow pointing at nothingness.

Yet he is, after all, explaining why he loves the desert. He is calling on certain values. See if you can figure out what they are. What is he saying about the arrow pointing at nothingness, for example? What kinds of values is he so proudly appealing to here?

Don’t overlook the irony in this piece either. The long list of desert horrors comes right after Abbey tells us that he loved the desert “at first sight.” Somehow the horrors make the desert loveable. How? And why does he tell